The Vedas, Hinduism, Hindutva

Kumkum Roy

Kunal Chakrabarti Tanika Sarkar



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ALAP

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TEXT
Kumkum Roy
Kunal Chakrabarti
Tanika Sarkar

WITH A FOREWORD BY
Romila Thapar

VISUALS
Soumik Nandy Majumdar
Parvez Kabir
Sanchayan Ghosh

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Foreword

There are popular perceptions about the *Vedas* often based on a passing acquaintance with them or on hearsay about them. People claim to be knowledgeable although they may not know much. Only a few have actually read them—in the original Sanskrit or in translation—and have an idea of their contents and the views they propagate. Some people are curious and want to know more. This book is intended for the curious.

The *Vedas* are popularly believed to be the foundation of our cultural heritage and are described as a collection of hymns and discourses composed by 'the Aryans'. It is further held that the *Vedas* are the bedrock of all Hindu ritual and belief and have been so throughout history. In recent years we have even had a political mobilization of substantial dimension which, under the label of Hindutva, has claimed that the Hindus are a nation, and as the indigenous people of India have a primacy in citizenship. This is a representation of Indian history that has been contested by historians.

These statements about the past and their relationship to the present, need to be probed by historians in order to assess whether they can be sustained. The three essays in this volume, each by a historian much respected in the profession, are an attempt at such an inquiry.

Kumkum Roy discusses the much-debated question of the origin of 'the Aryans' and the place of the *Vedas* in early Indian history. This question has to be investigated not only out of an intellectual curiosity about the past but also because it touches on political controversy. It is argued by some that the beginnings of Indian civilization as represented in the Indus cities, is of Aryan origin. Kumkum Roy has set the question in the context of the evidence on the society, culture and economy of those times and on the interaction between the varied groups of people that co-existed in that period. She then considers, turn by turn, the arguments that have been put forward by those that insist on the Harappa Culture

being Aryan and lays out the evidence that contradicts this argument. She questions the need for going back to the Vedas when historical change through the centuries has moulded the past. She discusses the current and more meaningful historical ways of analyzing the *Vedas*.

Kunal Chakrabarti shows the diverse strands of belief and practice that have gone into the making of Hinduism. Such diversity has created what is in many ways a unique religion formally different in structure from the Semitic religions. He points out that because of the social and economic changes of the centuries AD, new religious forms evolved and these have been labelled Puranic Hinduism. This led to a gradual decline of Vedic Brahmanism from a position of dominance in religious practice. There was a change in the important deities, they were now worshipped as images generally located in temples, and the Vedic sacrificial *yajna* was generally superseded by *puja* as the common form of worship with the relationship between the individual and the deity encapsulated in ideas of *bhakti*. This was a fundamentally different religious experience and involved a different religious organization from Vedic Brahmanism. It was in many ways more foundational to the Indian cultural heritage than Vedic Brahmanism since it allowed the incorporation of a large range of belief and practice, as it does to this day.

Tanika Sarkar's essay is a historical analysis of Hindutva. The Hindutva movement is rooted in the rise of religious nationalisms in India in the early twentieth century. Religious nationalisms of both varieties—Hindu and Muslim—opposed the mainstream nationalism which was more secular and which saw the colonial power as its enemy rather than the followers of the other religion. The Hindutva movement is an ideological umbrella for a number of groups claiming to be Hindu nationalists. Such groups demand a Hindu *rashtra* with a primacy of citizenship for Hindus, since Muslims, Christians and Communists (!) were declared to be foreigners. The Hindutva movement is rooted in contemporary times, is nourished by political mobilization and fantasizes about a Vedic past. The contradiction lies not only in the fantasy being histori-

cally rootless but also in being pertinent only to the Hindutva vision of how it wishes to transform current day Indian society.

The danger of such views is that they are bereft of a historical context as formulated by a range of historians over the last few decades; and further, these views are imprinted with the colonial interpretations of the Indian past as formulated in the nineteenth century. There is no recognition of the advances in historical knowledge that have taken place in the last half century. Historians therefore, have to continue to challenge colonial generalizations and their current clones in the history that takes its cue from Hindutva. This book is a praiseworthy attempt to do so.

New Delhi
March 2005

Romila Thapar

In Search of the Vedic Age





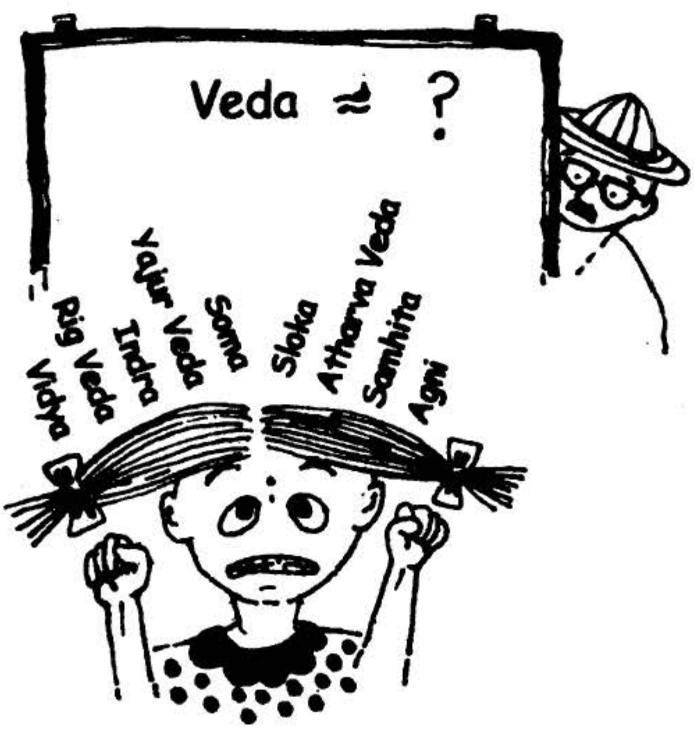
Most of us have heard about the Vedas, and some of us may even know or chant a few Vedic mantras such as the gayatri mantra. We may also have heard about or even learnt the so-called Vedic mathematics. And we probably have a vague idea about a period history called the Vedic age. If we are asked what the age was like, we may come up with a range of answers. Inevitably, we think of it as a time in the remote past. Some of us probably regard it as a golden age for women—a time when women composed hymns, took part in rituals, and possibly even attended assemblies. Others may think of the Vedic age as one where there was a certain amount of democracy.

Of late, and especially since the last fifteen years or so, we may have noticed certain other features being associated with the Vedic age. We often read articles in magazines or newspapers that say that the Vedic people were the 'real' authors of the Harappan civilization. This rests on the argument that the river Sarasvati,

mentioned in Vedic literature, is identical with one of the major rivers on which Harappan settlements are found. Put simply, this is extended to the conclusion that both the Harappan civilization and the Vedic texts were produced by one and the same people. The implication is that the Vedic mantras are the work of a highly civilized group of people, who lived in cities and traded with distant lands.

Inevitably, the lay person ends up rather confused, and probably wonders what is happening. One easy (and tempting) option is to dismiss these debates as irrelevant. As we will see, this is probably a valid stance to adopt. Nevertheless, it may be worth discussing what we are dismissing and why.

What exactly are the Vedas?



Before we proceed further, we need to clarify what exactly we mean by the term 'Vedas'. The word itself is derived from the root *vid*, meaning to know (*vidya*, a term we use in daily conversation, is also derived from the same root). Thus, in the very widest sense, Vedas are associated with knowledge.

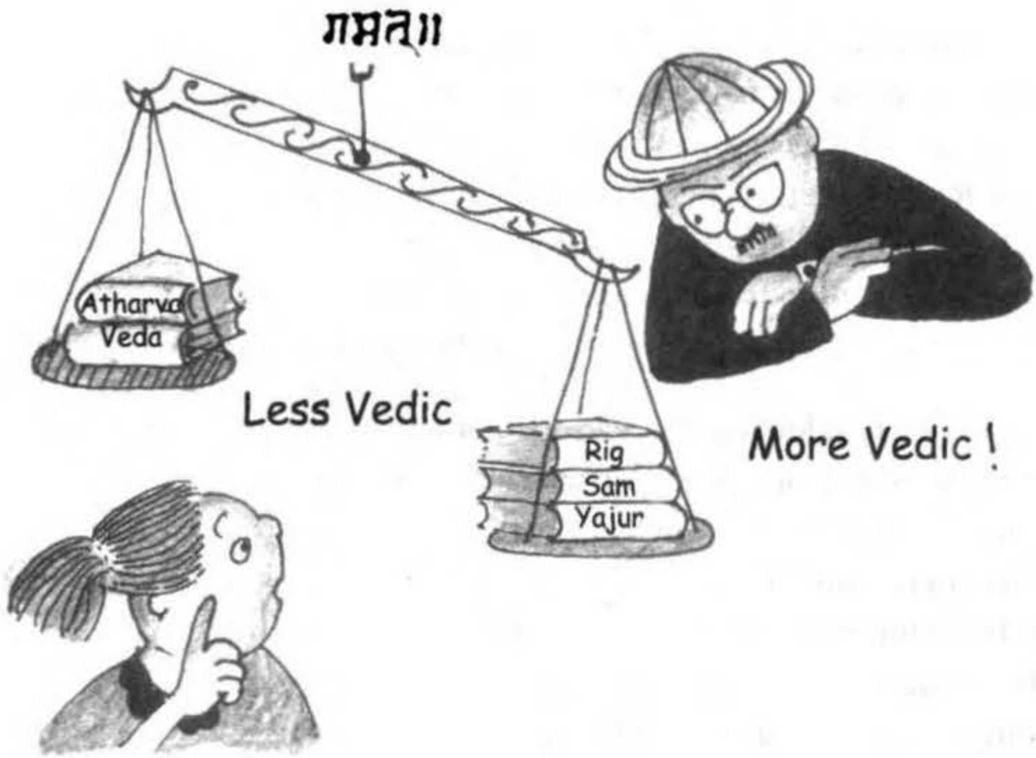
Is all knowledge then Vedic? Not really. While the term itself is general, it has been used for a specific set of texts, which we can broadly define as being concerned with rituals. These include the *Rigveda*, which is generally recognized as the earliest of the Vedas. The *Rigveda* gets its name from the term *rc*, meaning verse. These verses, which were often used as mantras in rituals, are grouped together in compositions called *suktas*, literally that which is well-said. The *Rigveda* contains over a thousand *suktas.*

Suktas were addressed to various deities, of whom three, Agni or the fire god; Indra, a god of warriors; and Soma, a god identified with a plant from which a special drink was prepared; were particularly important. About seven hundred *suktas* were addressed to these three deities. The *suktas* were basically prayers. Generally, the composers of *suktas* praised the deities and asked for various things—cattle, horses, rainfall, good pasture, and victory in battle.

The second Veda is the *Samaveda*. This consists of *suktas* chosen from the *Rigveda*, arranged in such a way so that they could be sung during rituals. (A *saman* is a *sukta* set to music). It is a kind of handbook for a special category of priest, known as the *udgatra,* who was expected to chant these hymns when rituals were performed. The *Samaveda* provides us with some idea about the development of systems of music.

The third Veda is the *Yajurveda.* It consists of a special category of mantras known as the *yajus.* These were often in prose, and were arranged in the sequence in which they were meant to be used in rituals. They were compiled by and for a special category of priests, known as the *adhvaryu,* who did the manual work during rituals, such as preparing the sacrificial fire and pouring in oblations.

And finally, we have the *Atharvaveda*, a text that contains some mantras in common with the *Rigveda*, but also includes a number of charms and spells meant to overcome disease, defeat enemies, win lovers, and so on. The *Rigveda* and other such collections of mantras are often known as *samhitas*.



Are some texts more Vedic than others?

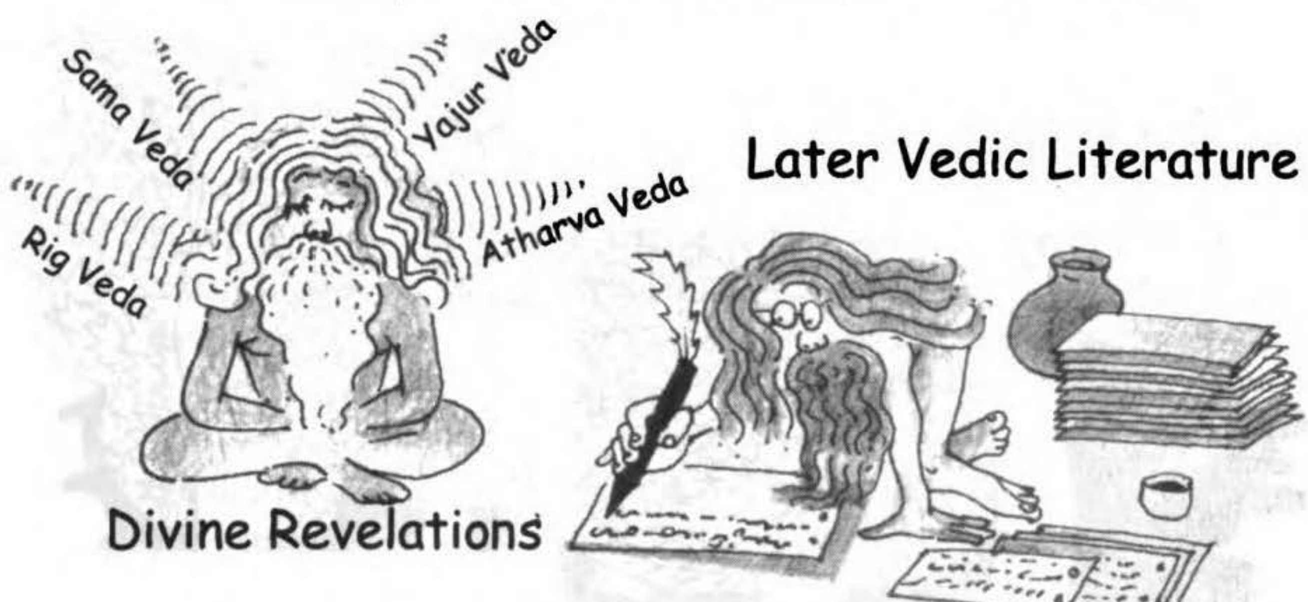
The answer seems to be yes. Through the ages, there has been a debate on whether the *Atharvaveda* should be considered as Vedic or not. This is evident in the use of the term *trayi vidya* to refer to the first three texts. While the *Atharvaveda* was given the status of a *veda,* it was not regarded as equally prestigious as the other three Vedas. This text gives us some idea about popular religious beliefs and practices.

There is another interesting development that we find in the later tradition. Whenever any text was regarded as particularly important, it was often referred to as the fifth Veda (the *panchamveda*). For example, the Mahabharata is often called a *panchamveda.*

Later Vedic Literature

Apart from the three or four Vedas, which primarily consist of mantras, there is an enormous body of literature that is often classified as later Vedic. There are at least three or four major categories that we can distinguish amongst these texts, and some, such as the Sutras, have further sub-divisions. These texts share certain common features. First, most of them are in prose, though occasionally they cite versified mantras. Second, they are generally regarded as the works of human beings, unlike the first four Vedas, which are often referred to as *sruti* because they are supposed to be divine revelations that were heard or intuitively grasped by sages. The idea of classifying some texts as *sruti* developed over a period of time.

In the Vedic hymns themselves, authors describe how they carefully



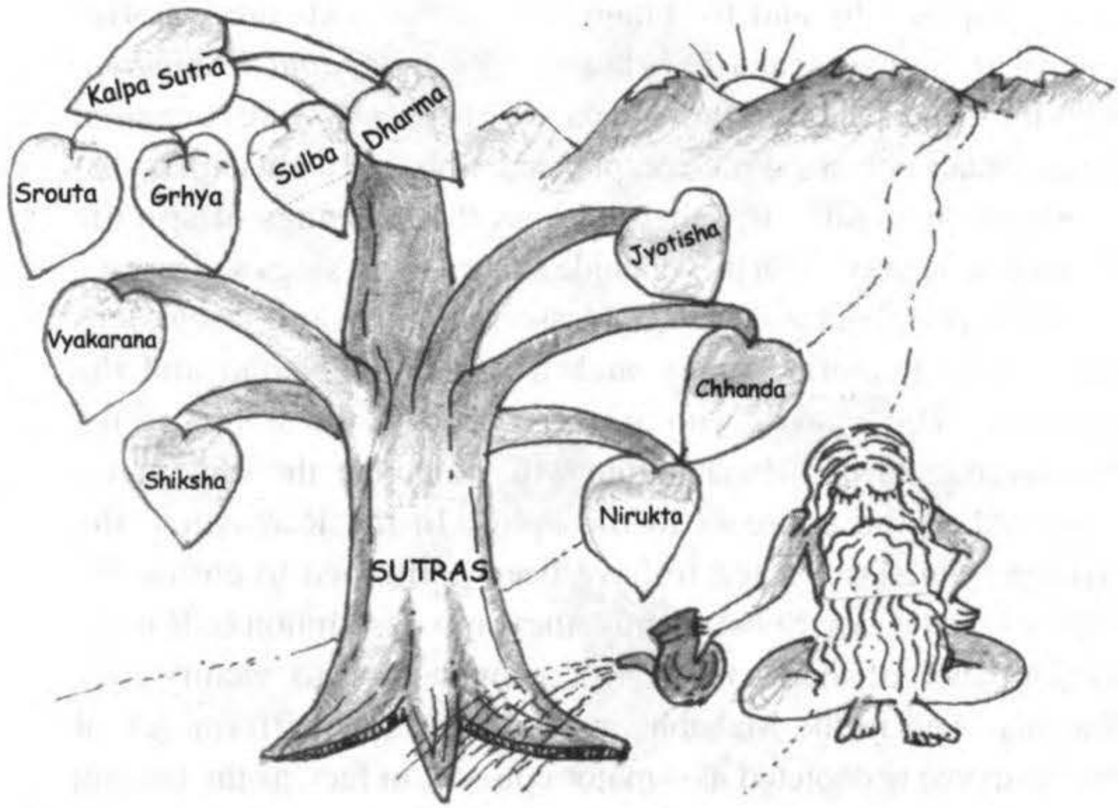
crafted hymns, just as skilful carpenters crafted chariots, or they compare the act of creating hymns to that of weavers. In other words, the authors took pride in their creations, and did not claim these to be divine revelations.

Brahmanas, Aranyakas and Upanishads: Most of us are familiar with the term brahmana as the name of a social category.



Incidentally, Brahmana is also the name of a type of literature, which was composed by and for brahmanas. These texts are massive: one of the longest, and best-known, the *Satapatha Brahmana,* runs into several hundred printed pages. These texts were composed when rituals became more complicated. Some of them explain the sequence of ritual acts, others discuss the meanings of specific mantras, and very often they include stories about kings and priests, as also myths about gods and goddesses. There are long discussions on how to perform rituals such as the *ashvamedha* and the *rajasuya.* Those of us who are familiar with the stories of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata will remember the importance assigned to these rituals in the epics. In the Ramayana, the *ashvamedha* is supposed to have been performed to ensure the birth of the heroes. Subsequently, there is a description of Rama's performance of the sacrifice, to commemorate his victory over Ravana. And in the Mahabharata, Yudhisthira's performance of the *rajasuya* is depicted as a major episode, in fact, as the turning point of the story.

While the Brahmanas are concerned with details of the sacrifice, the Aranyakas (literally belonging to the forest, a name used for texts that were meant to be learnt in solitude) and Upanishads (texts that were learnt sitting near a teacher) mark the beginning of a different tradition, that of philosophical speculation. Here, there is a sense that the real meaning of the sacrifice cannot be grasped through the mechanical performance of rituals. In some instances, it is expressed more sharply, as a feeling that the sacrifice is either futile or irrelevant. Besides, there is an emphasis on trying to understand the meaning of life and death, as well as of creation. Important ideas, such as those of rebirth on the basis of karma, find expression for the first time in these texts. They remained influential, and formed the core of what later developed as the school of Vedantic thought. (The term *vedanta* means the end or the ultimate goal of the Vedas). When we discuss the gradual decline of the Vedic religion in the next chapter of this book, we shall learn more about the philosophical speculation in the Upanishads.



Sutras: The term *sutra* means thread. Sutras refer to a vast body of literature, composed on the principle of compressing as much information as possible in as few words. Information, ideas, precepts and norms were presented in cryptic formulae that were easy to memorize. Some of the Sutras resemble the Brahmanas in form and content. Others are extremely terse. Six classes of Sutras are recognized as being *vedangas*, limbs of the Vedas. These include 'Shiksha', dealing with the pronunciation of Vedic mantras; 'Nirukta', dealing with etymology; 'Chhanda', dealing with metre; 'Vyakarana', dealing with grammar; 'Jyotisha', dealing with astronomy; and the Kalpa Sutras.

The Kalpa Sutras in turn, have four sub-divisions. Of these the Srauta Sutras, as their name suggests, deal with the rituals that were derived from the *srutis*, including the soma sacrifice, *ashvamedha* and *rajasuya* amongst others. There are also the Grhya Sutras, which contain detailed prescriptions about domestic rituals. These include rituals associated with birth, marriage and death. Besides, there are the Sulba Sutras, which lay down geometrical

rules for building sacrificial altars. And then there are the Dharma Sutras, which lay down social norms, and prescribe penalties for violations.

Before proceeding further, let us summarize and contextualize our findings.

• It is possible to define the Vedas in both maximal and minimal ways: if we use a maximal criterion, we will have to include everything from the *Rigveda* to the Vedangas. If we use a minimal definition, we can confine ourselves to the three or four *samhitas*.

• This enormous body of literature was composed over several centuries. There are debates regarding the exact dates, but it is possible that the composition of the *Rigveda* began nearly four thousand years ago, and that it was finally compiled in the form in which we now know it, around three thousand years ago.

• Most of the vast corpus of later Vedic literature was probably composed and compiled over a period of five hundred years, between three thousand and two thousand five hundred years ago.

• However, some texts, especially the Vedangas, may be later.

• If we look at the entire span during which these texts were written, it may be as long as two thousand years. It is unlikely that society remained static during such a long time.

• If we examine the geographical references in the texts, it is evident that the authors of the *Rigveda* were most familiar with the region of the Sapta Sindhu, the area drained by the Indus and its tributaries, corresponding most closely with present-day Punjab. Incidentally, there is only one reference to the Ganga and Yamuna in the text.

• In later Vedic literature, the Ganga-Yamuna Doab is regarded as an area of central importance, while the north-west of the subcontinent is regarded as a peripheral area. Regions outside north India are only vaguely known.

Who Composed the Vedas?



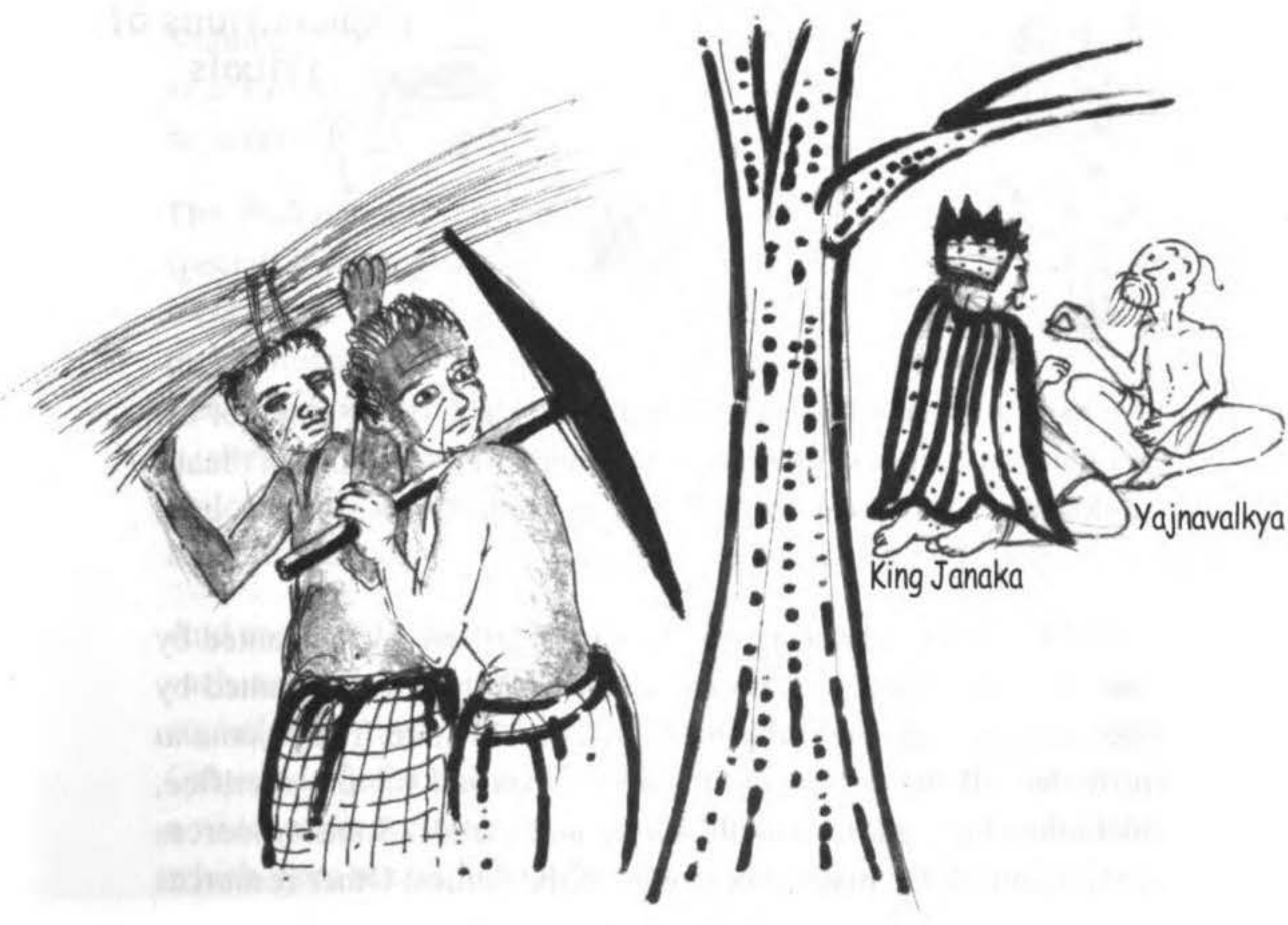
As is obvious, the Vedas were composed by several people over a very long span of time. In some cases, works are attributed to single authors. In general, each of the *suktas* of the *Rigveda* is regarded as the composition of a specific seer. In the case of the Brahmanas and the Kalpa Sutras, the works are so vast that it is clear that more than one person must have composed them. So, although they are often ascribed to single authors, we can safely suggest that several people played a role in shaping the contents and form of these massive texts.

Beyond tracing the names of authors, there are certain other deductions that we can make. While the earliest composers were not known as brahmanas, as *varna* identities were not particularly important at that stage, the compositions were preserved by priests. And later Vedic texts, especially the Brahmanas, were composed by priests. In other words, these were by and for ritual specialists.

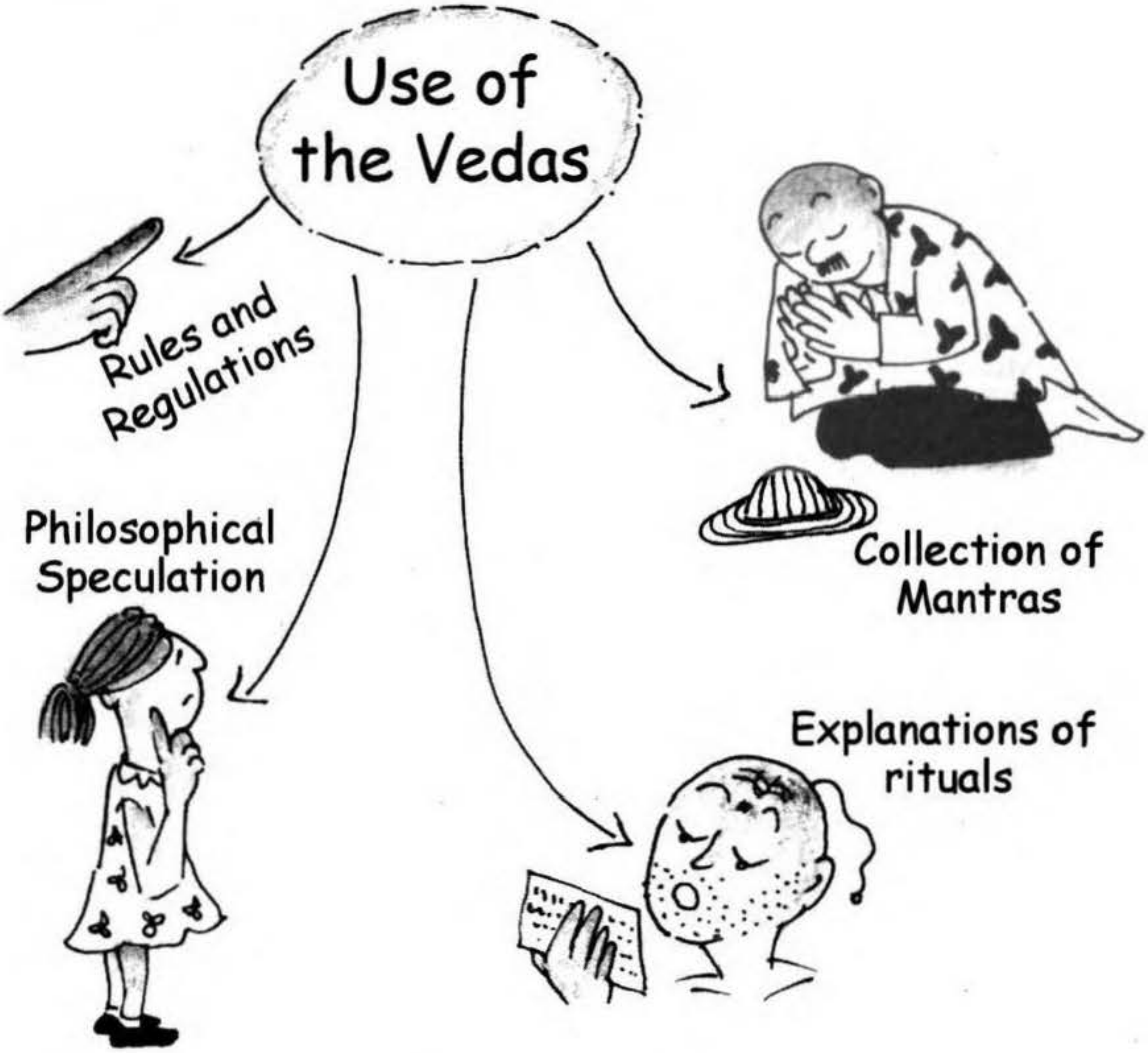
What about the other social categories? Occasionally, the

Upanishads include dialogues which are supposed to be conversations between kings and brahmanas. Perhaps the most famous of these is the conversation between king Janaka and Yagnavalka of the *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad.* These are not literal transcripts of conversations, but preserved from the memory of those who heard them, and, once again, they were composed and preserved by priests. Members of other social categories rarely figure as participants in such discussions.

Much is made of the participation of women in the composition of Vedic texts. Here, we need to take into account just how slender the evidence is. Only about fifteen of the more than thousand *suktas* in the *Rigveda* were composed by women. And while we have the names of dozens of men who participated in philosophical discussions, the names of only two women, Maitreyi and Gargi, survive. Clearly, such women were exceptional.



What were the Vedas used for?



We have seen how diverse the Vedic texts are. While some of the texts are collections of mantras, others include explanations of rituals, philosophical speculation, and rules and regulations. Clearly, each category of text was used in different ways.

Mantras were used during rituals. Usually, these were chanted by one or more priests, occasionally some mantras were chanted by the *yajamana*, the man who sponsored the sacrifice. The *yajamana* provided all the resources that were required for the sacrifice, including fuel, ghee, animals, cloth, and metals. Some resources were required for making offerings to the deities. Other resources

were given to the priest as a fee or *dakshina*, as an acknowledgement of his services. All the benefits of the sacrifice, such as obtaining the blessings and support of the deities, were supposed to be for the *yajamana*. Very rarely was the *yajamana's* wife expected to chant some mantras as well. So there was a marked social division between those who could chant mantras and those who could not. And the use of mantras in the ritual made this distinction very obvious.

The later Vedic texts, especially the Sutras, are categorical in denying women and shudras access to Vedic learning. As such, large sections of the population would not have been able to learn and chant mantras. Such restrictions were often reinforced through stories. Many of us may be familiar with the story of Shambuka from the Ramayana. Shambuka was a shudra who was engaged in ascetic practices. This apparently upset the brahmanas, who complained to Rama as king. Rama decided to 'rectify' the situation by killing Shambuka. Even if the story was not literally true, it could be read as a warning that shudras who did not accept this restriction could be severely and cruelly punished.

The Brahmanas were of importance only to priests. They were specialized notes on rituals, of little interest to others. These texts incorporated debates and discussions amongst priests, and reveal their attitudes and beliefs, as well as their dilemmas and problems. The Aranyakas and the Upanishads were important for those who wished to go beyond the sacrifice, who wanted to ask deep philosophical questions. It is likely that these were of interest to a limited audience.

And each of the Sutras was meant for very distinctive use. Some, such as those on pronunciation, astrology, grammar, metre, and etymology, were meant for ritual specialists. So also were the Srauta, Grhya, and Sulba Sutras. The only Sutras which probably concerned a wider audience were the Dharma Sutras, which laid down norms which were meant to be followed by all sections of society.

The Language of the Vedas

The Vedas were composed in a form of Sanskrit that is often referred to as Vedic Sanskrit, which is different from the Sanskrit many of us may have learnt in school. We are not quite sure whether Vedic Sanskrit was used in daily conversation, or whether it was used only on special ritual occasions. It may have been a special variant of a language that was in daily use.

We often tend to use different versions of the same language when talking with people: certain phrases may be used amongst friends, but are avoided on more formal occasions. Similarly, if we use formal language in daily conversation, people we talk to will not feel very comfortable. Vedic Sanskrit is a formal language, and like all such languages, would not have been easily understood even when it was first used. Incidentally, the language changed over time, and that used in the Upanishads and Sutras is more easily understood than the Vedic mantras.

Can Historians Use the Vedas?

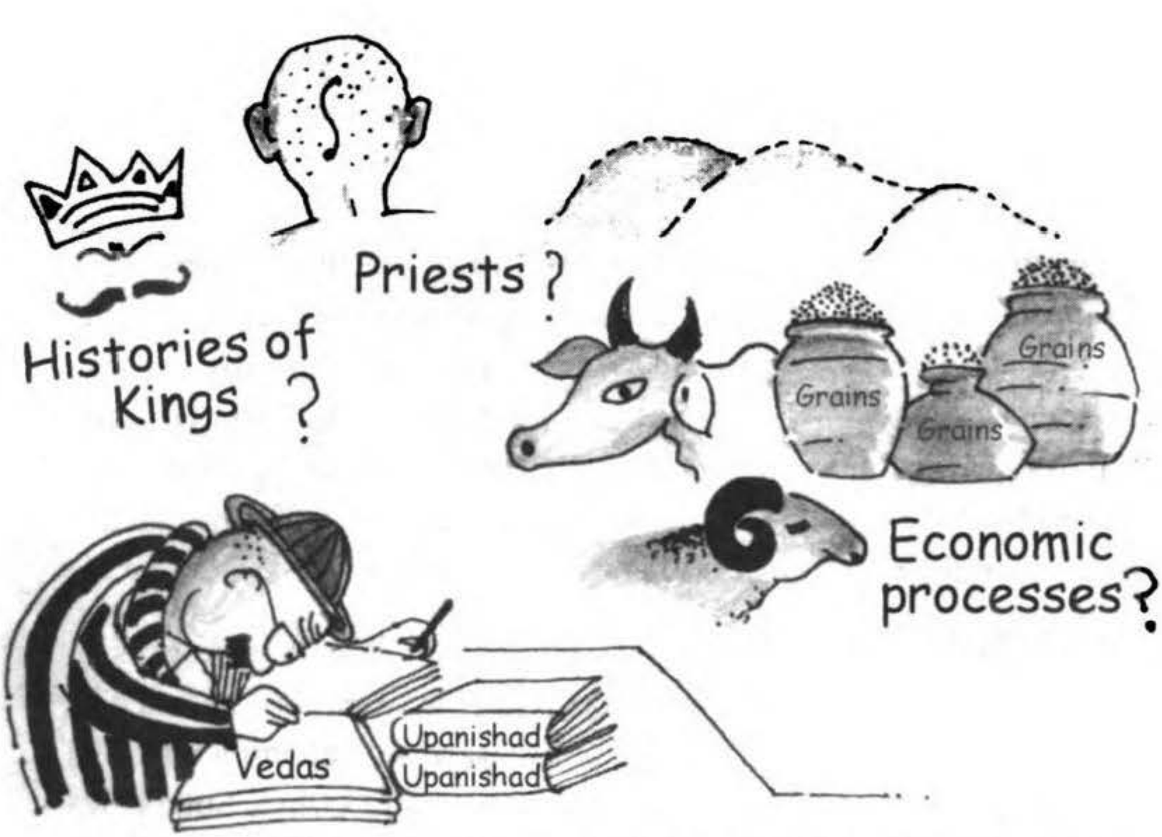
This is an extremely valid question. Remember that the Vedas contain mantras, explanations, discussions, and rules. They do not present us with a historical account of events. And yet, historians have used the Vedas to provide us with an account of the past. How and why do they do this?

To start with, it is useful to remember that we can have different kinds of histories. These include:

histories of individual kings and priests, providing an account of what they did

• histories of economic processes, such as the spread of pastoralism, agriculture, craft production and trade

• histories of social developments: we may want to know how the system of *varna* emerged, or how gender relations were shaped



• histories of daily life: we may be interested in what people ate, wore, their houses, and modes of transport

• histories of religious and cultural ideas, beliefs and practices

Let us look at each of these and see what light, if any, the Vedas can throw on them. To start with histories of kings and priests: the Vedas provide us with dozens of names of kings and priests, but very little by way of detail. Very often, these names are included as part of a passing reference or allusion. It is obvious that both the authors and the audience were familiar with the details, and the names were enough to remind them of what was meant to be communicated. So the scattered information that is available does not allow us to reconstruct a continuous political history. What is possible is to provide a glimpse of perceptions about rulers, which, if used carefully, can help us to outline the contours of political institutions and relations. The Dharma Sutras lay down rules about the rights and duties of kings and priests amongst other things. We are not sure about how far these rules were implemented, but it does give us some idea of what was expected of them.

What about economic processes? Here again, we have no direct evidence. However, historians have often used the mantras in imaginative ways. Many of the mantras use analogies. These are often based on natural and social phenomena. For instance the deity and the devotee are compared with things that the authors were familiar with. So, the deity could be compared to a cow, and the devotee to the calf. If we study such analogies carefully, we can understand how important certain objects were. The fact that cattle are frequently mentioned in analogies in the *Rigveda* has been used to suggest that pastoralism was a major occupation in the earliest phase, in the north-western part of the subcontinent.

Apart from analogies, historians have also collated references to the things whose use is recommended in the ritual. For instance, if offerings of grain such as rice and barley are recommended, as they are in the Brahmanas and the Srauta and Grhya Sutras, we can argue that agriculture was becoming increasingly important when the later Vedic texts were composed. And finally, prayers provide us with some insight. We can suggest that people will pray for what they consider important. If most of the prayers in the *Rigveda* are for cattle, horses and offspring, we can conclude that these were regarded as crucial resources in society.

Similar strategies have been used to reconstruct social developments. If we have (as we do in the later Vedic literature) analogies comparing the kshatriya and the vaishya to the eater and the food respectively, we can conclude that social relations between these two *varnas* were oppressive. And if there are prayers to ensure that wives remain subordinate to their husbands, we can assume that not all women were submissive. As in the other instances, incidental references help us to catch a glimpse of daily life as well. This may not be as full as we can wish for, but nonetheless, it is valuable. As may be expected, the maximum details that we can derive are on histories of religious beliefs and practices. The texts tell us about gods (and occasionally about goddesses as well), and by tracing references through the long time span during which these


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texts were composed, we can see how some gods rose in importance, how others faded away. We can also see how rituals became more complicated and expensive, and we can see how household rituals were gradually (though never fully) standardized.

But are there problems? Yes indeed. It is worth remembering that there are many things that we may never be able to know. For instance, kings and priests whose names have not been preserved by the brahmanas, and their achievements, if any, are lost forever. Similarly, as far as economic and social developments are concerned, we can learn about those that were considered significant by the brahmanas. Others are irretrievably lost. And the same holds true for religious beliefs and practices. It is a sobering thought that we will never have a 'complete' picture, and that what we know comes filtered through the perspective of the brahmana composers, compilers and preservers of the tradition. We have to be constantly aware of this perspective, to ensure that we do not consciously or unconsciously adopt or adapt it in our own reconstructions.

Yet, these are not the only dangers. Very often, historians make the problem even more complicated by their own narrow perspectives. Sometimes, this is simply an urge to try and prove that Indians were the first and the best in everything. And because the Vedas are amongst the earliest known texts in India, there is an attempt to trace everything 'good' back to the Vedas. This leads to very serious distortions in our understanding. Let us now proceed to examine some of these, and see why they are problematic. We will deal with three themes:

- the attempts to equate the Harappan civilization with Vedic literature
- depictions of Vedic society, including the 'status of women'
- attempts to trace the origins of all religious developments to the Vedas


LONG LIVE THE "HINDUS"
U MEAN THE *"INDUS"?

How Vedic is the Harappan Civilization?



Ever since the archaeological excavations of the 1920s, which revealed the existence of the ancient cities of Harappa and Mohenjodaro (both in present-day Pakistan) the Harappan civilization has exerted an immense fascination on the minds of educated Indians. Part of the fascination is certainly justified. Here is evidence for cities with well-laid out drains and streets, indicative of levels of town planning that have rarely been excelled. There is also evidence for the use of writing on seals, and for long-distance trade in a range of products, including metals, semi-precious stones, timber, and exotic produce. What is also impressive is the sheer extent of area that was encompassed within the network of the civilization, extending from Afghanistan to the Ganga-Yamuna doab, from the foothills of Kashmir to Baluchistan, Gujarat, and Maharashtra, with evidence of contact with Mesopotamia (present-day Iraq). That the Harappan civilization is unique is well established.

Those who discovered the Harappan civilization were quite convinced that it was pre-Vedic. Yet, since the last few decades, a

number of claims have been made, arguing that it is in fact a Vedic civilization. It is argued that both the Harappan civilization and the early Vedic tradition developed in the same area, and that there are similarities between them. (We can leave the later Vedic texts out for the moment, as their geographical focus is different). There are a number of grounds on which the argument for coincidence is advanced. Let us examine some of the major ones and see whether they are justified.

The Question of the Script: The seals that have been found at Harappan sites are quite unique. Usually, they are square or rectangular. They are made of a soft stone known as steatite or soapstone. Generally, the surface of the seal has two parts, one showing a figure, usually an animal, and the second part containing an inscription. The inscriptions are written in a script that has not been deciphered as yet. There have been all kinds of speculations about the script and the language (s) that were in use. Perhaps the script is pictographic; perhaps each symbol stands for an idea.

Decipherment is a painfully slow process. Wherever decipherments have been possible, these have been worked out with the aid of bilingual, and in some cases trilingual inscriptions, written in more than one script. Scholars have worked backward from the known to the unknown, and puzzled out the meanings of signs. So, for instance, the cuneiform script (used in ancient Mesopotamia) was deciphered from an inscription that had the same text in Old Persian



Harappan Seals



and in Akkadian (one of the languages of Mesopotamia). And the hieroglyphic script (used in ancient Egypt) was deciphered from an inscription that had the same text in both Greek and hieroglyphic. As of now, we have no inscription that contains both the Harappan and any other known script. As such, possibilities of decipherment are remote.

What is also evident is that the as-yet undeciphered script has little in common with later traditions of writing in the subcontinent, as well as with those of other civilizations. Till the script is deciphered, we have no way of knowing anything about the language (s) which may have been written. We also need to remember that the number of words that are inscribed on the seals is limited. Even if the script is deciphered, we will probably find that the seals, given their nature, contain proper names, designations, or place names. They may furnish very few details about other linguistic features. Although it may not be as satisfying as a definite answer, it is best to recognize that, in the present state of our knowledge, we can do little more than acknowledge that we do not know what the language written on the seals of the Harappans was. Claims to the contrary are misleading, and are motivated by interests other than those of scholarship.

Given this state of uncertainty, it is amazing to note the frequency with which we come across assertions that the script was used to write a variety of Sanskrit. These claims are not based on scientific principles and can neither be proved nor disproved till the script is deciphered. Nevertheless, constant assertions are made, perhaps under the assumption that a lie, if repeated sufficiently, becomes acceptable as the truth.

The Mystery of the Sarasvati: Of late, we have been hearing that the Harappan civilization should be renamed as the Sarasvati civilization, or as the Indus-Sarasvati civilization. Perhaps it is worth understanding why is it being done and whether it is necessary.

Most of us may be familiar with Sarasvati as the goddess of learning in the Hindu pantheon. However, in the Vedas (especially in the *Rigveda*), Sarasvati is the name of a river. There are three *suktas* in praise of the river, and it is mentioned elsewhere as well, as a goddess, along with other rivers, especially the Sapta Sindhu, the Indus and its tributaries. Evidently, it was a fairly important river for the composers of these hymns. The waters of the river were also used on special occasions, such as for the *abhisheka* of the raja during the *rajasuya* sacrifice.

How does this connect up with the Harappan civilization? Several small sites of the civilization have been traced along the Ghaggar-Hakra valley, a stream that starts in the Shivaliks and then dwindles away. Those who claim that the Harappan civilization is in fact Vedic, argue that the Ghaggar-Hakra is identical with the Sarasvati, and that therefore the Sarasvati should be regarded as the cradle of the Harappan civilization.

There are several problems with this argument.

1. There is a long-standing archaeological convention of naming civilizations and cultures on the basis of the sites where they were first found. The Harappan civilization gets its name from the fact that it was first discovered at Harappa. Why should we suddenly give up this accepted scholarly practice and adopt a new name? Is it because Harappa is in present-day Pakistan?

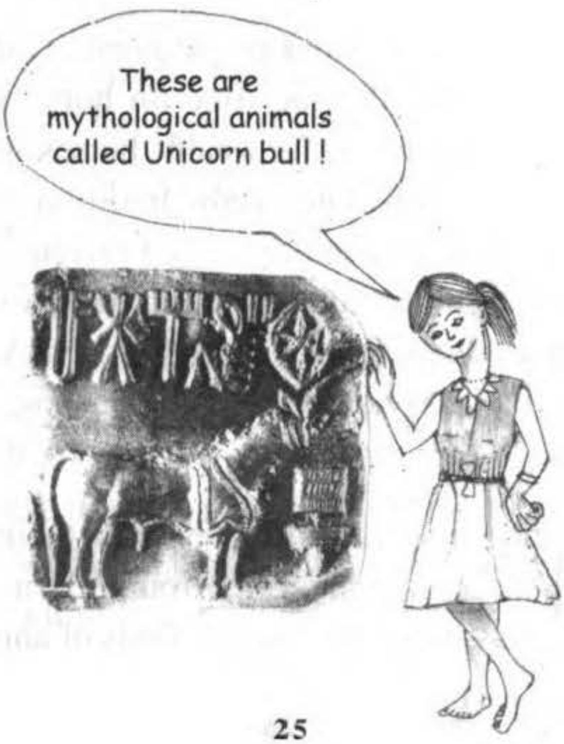
2. The period when we find fully developed cities is often referred to as the Mature Harappan phase (beginning from c. 2700 BCE). The preceding phase is often called the pre-Harappan or the early Harappan phase. This is a period when we find settlements in Baluchistan, Sind, Punjab and Rajasthan. It is likely that the Mature Harappan developments were a result of interaction amongst the people living in all these regions. To suggest that the Ghaggar-Hakra valley was the primary centre from where the civilization emerged and then spread to the other areas would be going against the archaeological evidence.

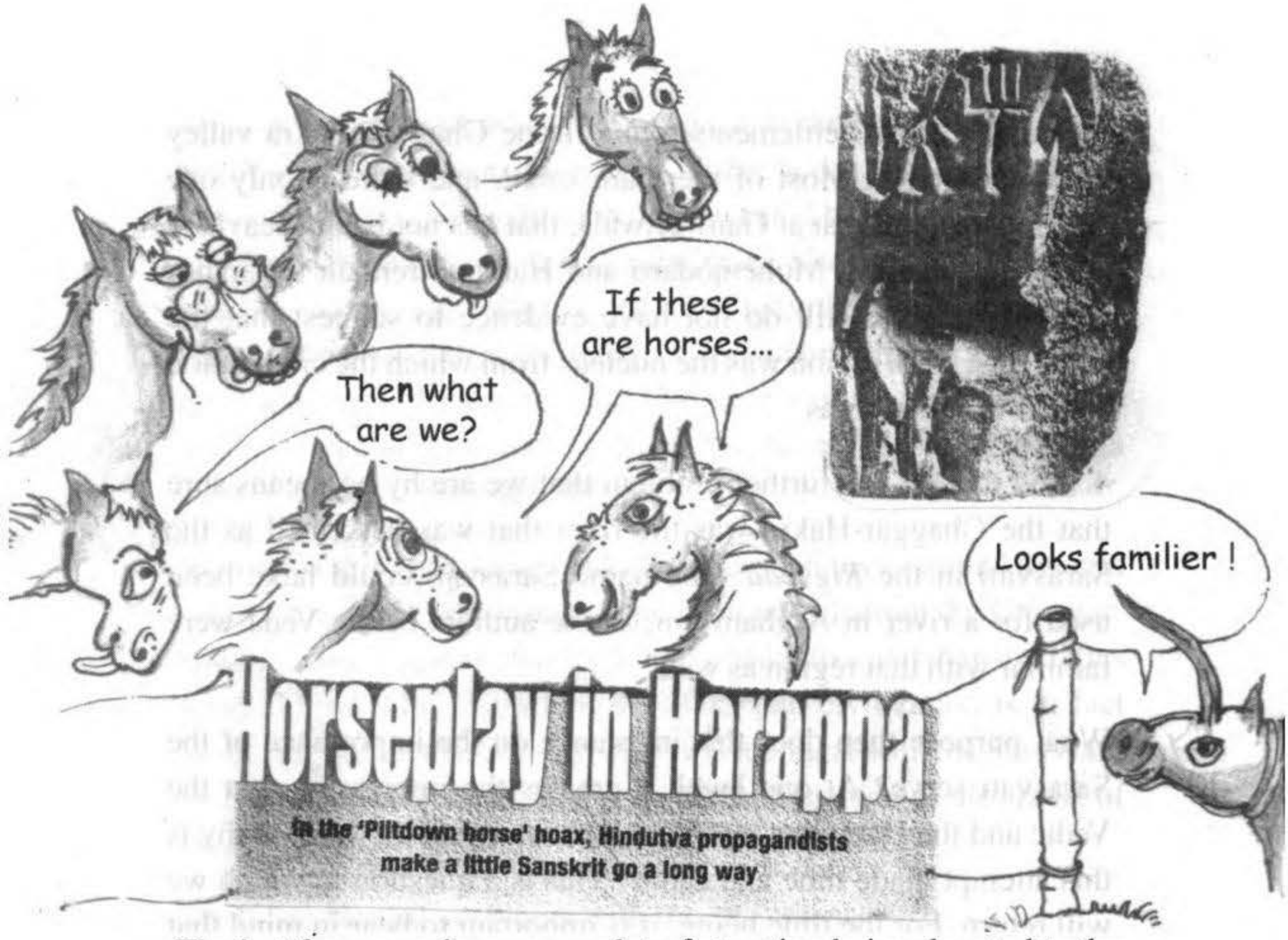
3. The Harappan settlements found in the Ghaggar-Hakra valley are quite unique. Most of them are small, and there is only one large settlement, that at Ganweriwala, that has not been excavated as yet. As of now, Mohenjodaro and Harappa remain the major known sites. We still do not have evidence to suggest that the Ghaggar-Hakra region was the nucleus from which the civilization spread to other areas.

4. And there is the further problem that we are by no means sure that the Ghaggar-Hakra was the river that was described as the Sarasvati in the *Rigveda*. The name Sarasvati could have been used for a river in Afghanistan, as the authors of the Veda were familiar with that region as well.

What purpose then does this insistence on the importance of the Sarasvati serve? At one level, it creates the impression that the Vedic and the Harappan civilization are one and the same. Why is this attempt made time and again? This is a question to which we will return. For the time being, it is important to bear in mind that calling the Harappan civilization the Sarasvati civilization is misleading, to say the least.

Chasing the Elusive Horse :





The last few years have seen a lot of attention being devoted to the horse, and its presence or absence in the Harappan civilization. Why is the horse given so much importance?

The horse, along with cattle, figures very often in the *Rigveda.* Deities are frequently compared to the horse, and they are often visualized as coming to the sacrifice on horse-drawn chariots. Besides, when there are prayers for wealth, horses are often included in these. And finally, in the later Vedic tradition, the *ashvamedha* or horse sacrifice becomes a major ritual. Obviously, the horse was an important animal for the authors of the Vedic texts. That is why, for those who argue that the Harappan civilization is Vedic, it becomes very important to try and find evidence for the horse in the Harappan civilization.

What kind of evidence do they look for? First, there is the evidence of skeletal remains of animals, often found during the course of archaeological excavations. In a sense, finds of animal bones are a

direct proof of the existence and use of the animal by the people of those times. Unfortunately for those who are engaged in this quest, finds of horse bones have been negligible, though not entirely absent. Finds of other animal bones, including those of cattle, have been far more plentiful.

Then there has been a search for indirect evidence. This takes the form of looking for representations of the horse on seals, and in sculpture. Here, the story has been even more bizarre. So desperate has been the need to 'find' the horse that some scholars have not hesitated to even fabricate evidence. In one instance, there was an international scandal, as a scholar declared that he had found a seal showing a horse on it. This proved to be a fake, created using computer graphics! And while pictures of terracotta horses are occasionally shown, these look like four footed animals, and are not distinctly horse-like. So we have to reach the conclusion that while the horse was present in the Harappan civilization, it was by no means as important as it seems to have been in the Vedic tradition.

What are the similarities between the Harappan and the Vedic Economies?

We have seen how historians try to arrive at an understanding of the Vedic economy from examining prayers, analogies and the use of various articles in rituals. Archaeologists, who try to reconstruct the economy of the Harappan people, deal with different kinds of evidence: metal and stone objects that survive through time, and remains of plants, wood or cloth, that survive if burnt either accidentally or deliberately.

• From this they suggest that the Harappan people practised a variety of crafts: pot-making, making copper and bronze tools, weapons, utensils and ornaments, making things of gold and silver, using stone to make tools, and various semi-precious stones to make some of the best beads that were known in the ancient world, carving stone seals and sculpture, and weaving cloth. In most instances,

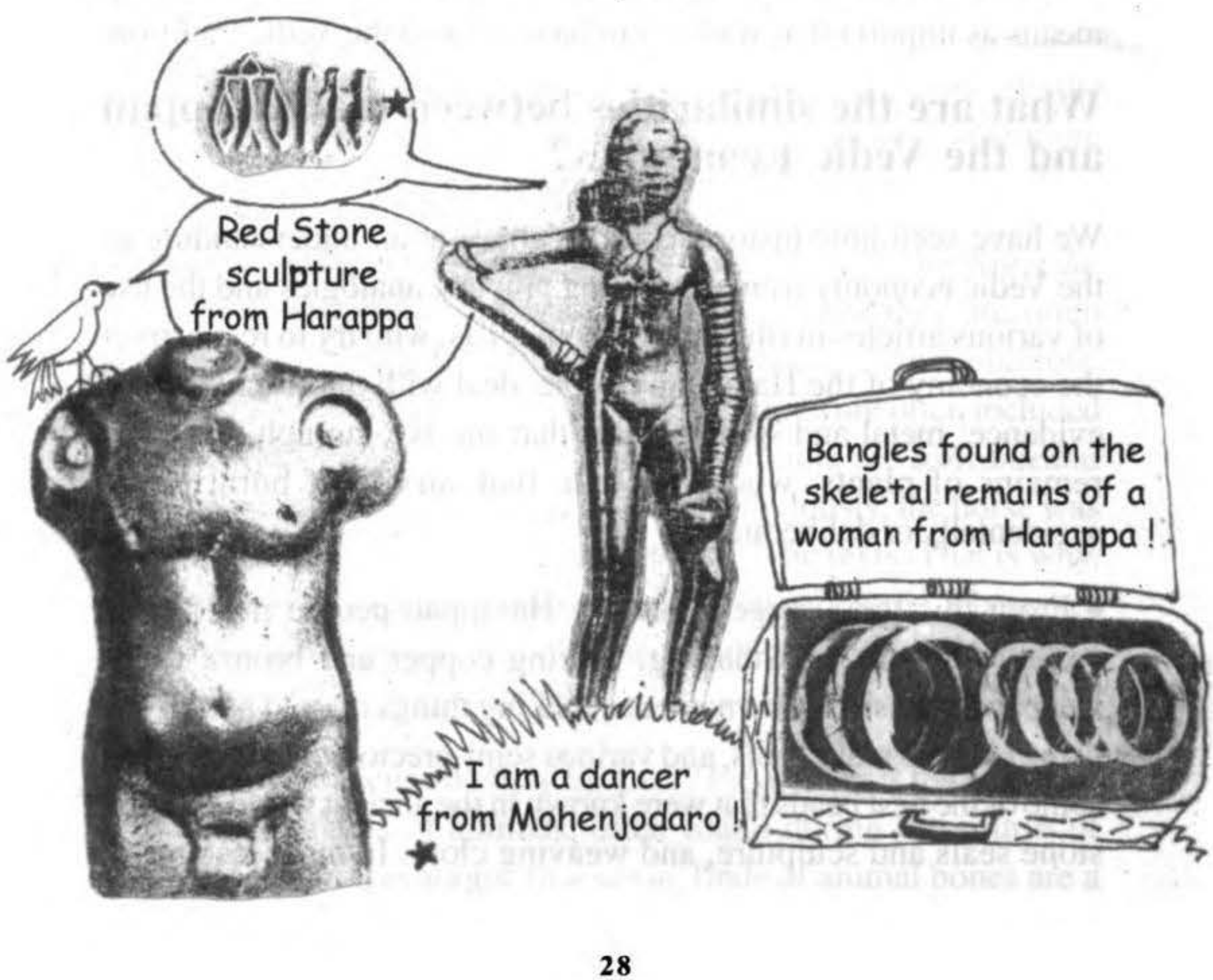
archaeologists are able to reconstruct the ways in which craft production was organized. They suggest that, given the standardization of the finished product, there must have been some kind of central organization that monitored supplies of raw material, the production process, and the distribution of the finished product.

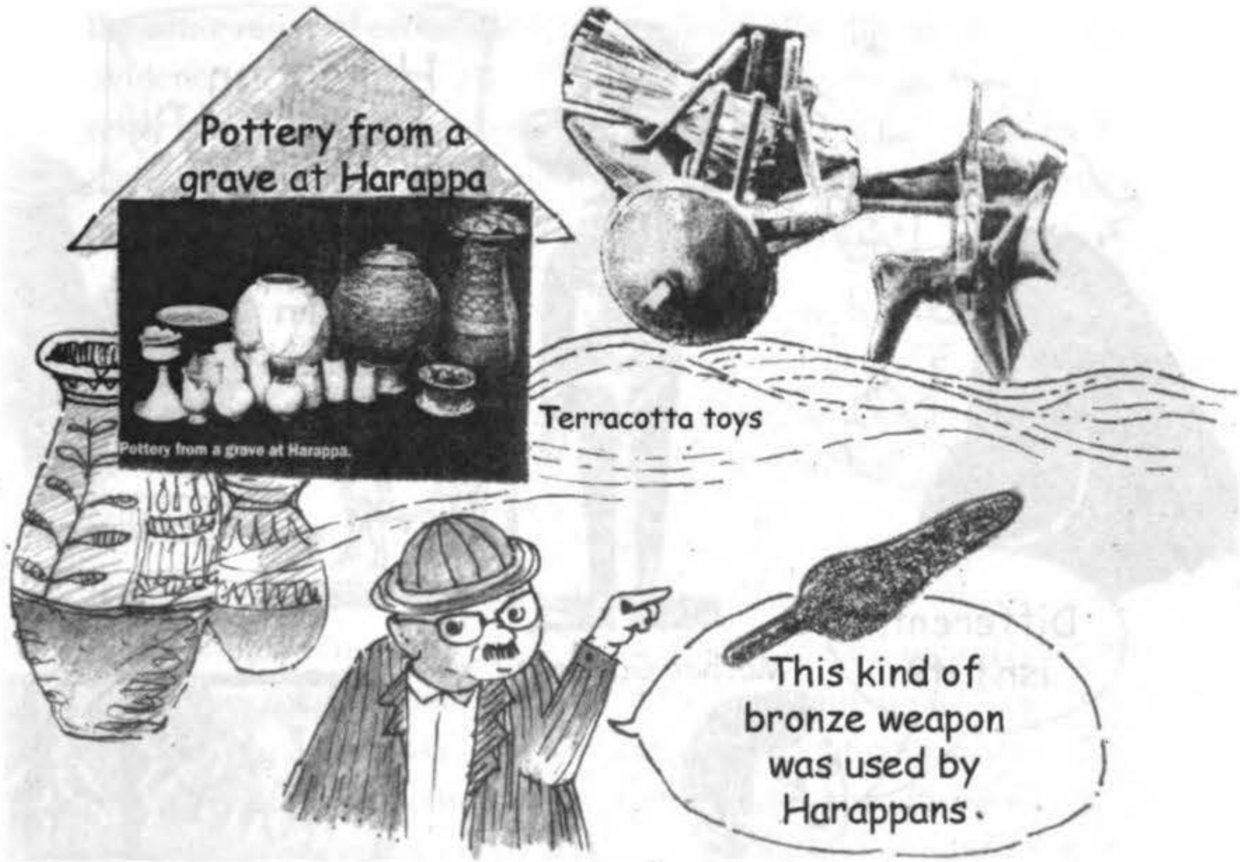
• There is also evidence for long-distance trade, especially with West Asia, along sea routes, and for procuring resources from different parts of the subcontinent and beyond.

• Besides, there is evidence for plough agriculture, and the cultivation of a range of crops. In fact, a well-developed agricultural basis was critical for the sustenance of urban centres.

• And finally, there is evidence for pastoralism, hunting and fishing.

Where would we look for evidence for these practices within the early Vedic tradition? Let us start with the analogies used by the

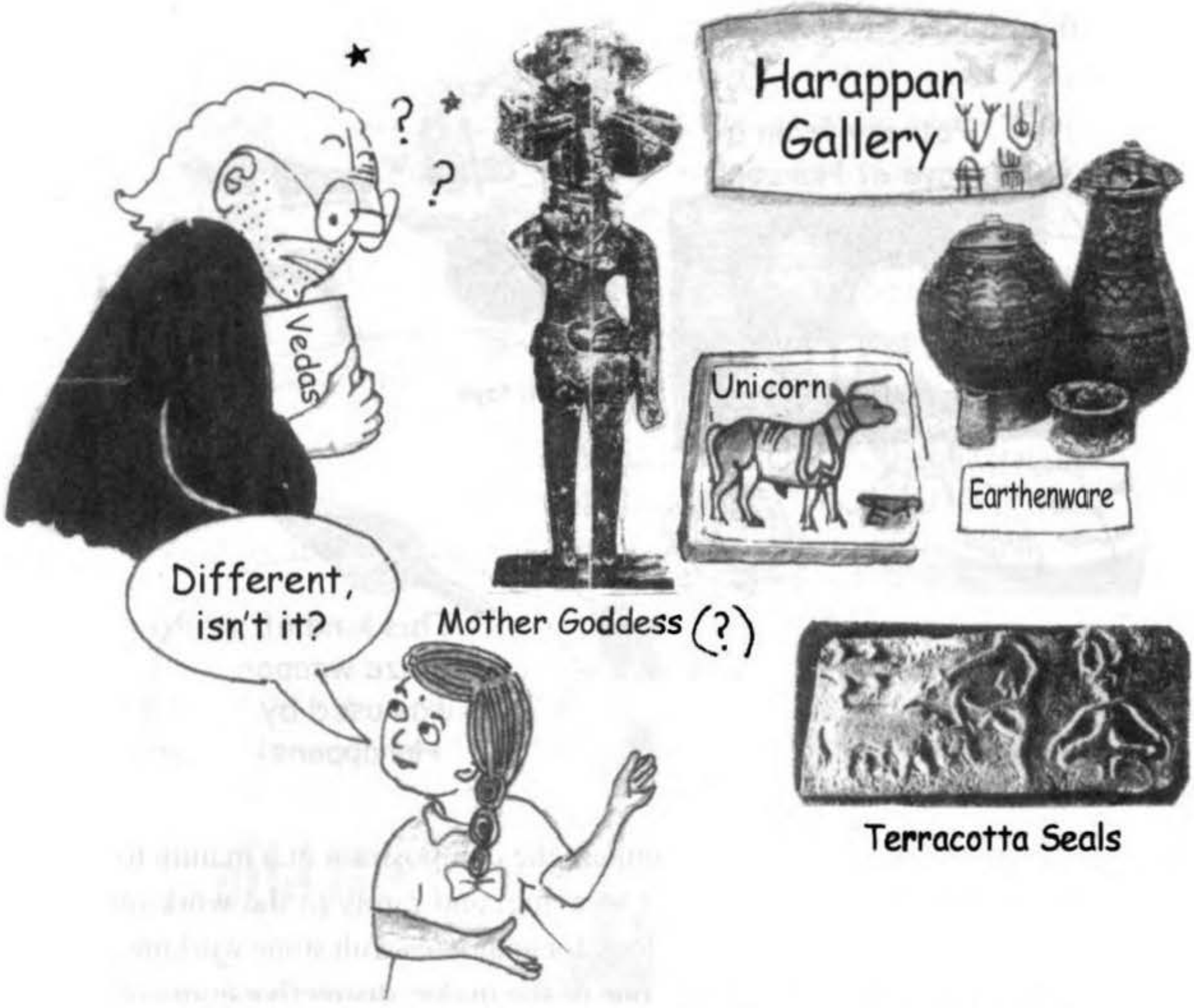




poets. Occasionally, poets compare the composition of a mantra to the work of a carpenter, or to weaving, and rarely to the work of metal smiths. However, if we look for analogies with stone working, we will be disappointed. So, one of the major, distinctive crafts of the Harappan civilization finds no mention in early Vedic mantras.

What about long-distance trade? There are occasional analogies that refer to the boat, as well as analogies that mention the word *samudra.* However, in many instances the term *samudra* seems to be used to refer to a large body of water, rather than to the sea.

There are some analogies that refer to agriculture, but these are few and far between. They do not suggest an active interest in the process of cultivation. Hunting and fishing, likewise, rarely figure in the early Vedic tradition. What does seem to be the most important ingredient of the early Vedic imagery is pastoralism. This provides the theme for hundreds of analogies, which suggest a close familiarity with this one activity. So, with the exception of



pastoralism, which was by no means the dominant mode of subsistence in the Harappan context, there is no other area where the archaeological evidence and the textual evidence coincide.

What about the evidence of Vedic prayers? We do not find any prayers for acquiring the skills of craftsmanship, nor for success in long-distance exchange. Prayers for agricultural prosperity, too, are few and far between. In contrast, prayers for cattle wealth are far more prolific. And, if we look at the objects mentioned in the early Vedic texts, we note that stone objects (apart from the pressing stones for extracting *soma* juice) are virtually never mentioned. What is more, there is only one generic term used for grain, *yava*.

So we can safely conclude that although it is difficult to reconstruct

the entire range of economic activities from either the archaeological evidence or from the textual evidence, the elements that can be retrieved indicate a marked divergence between the economy of the Harappan civilization and the glimpses of economic activities that we can derive from the early Vedic evidence.

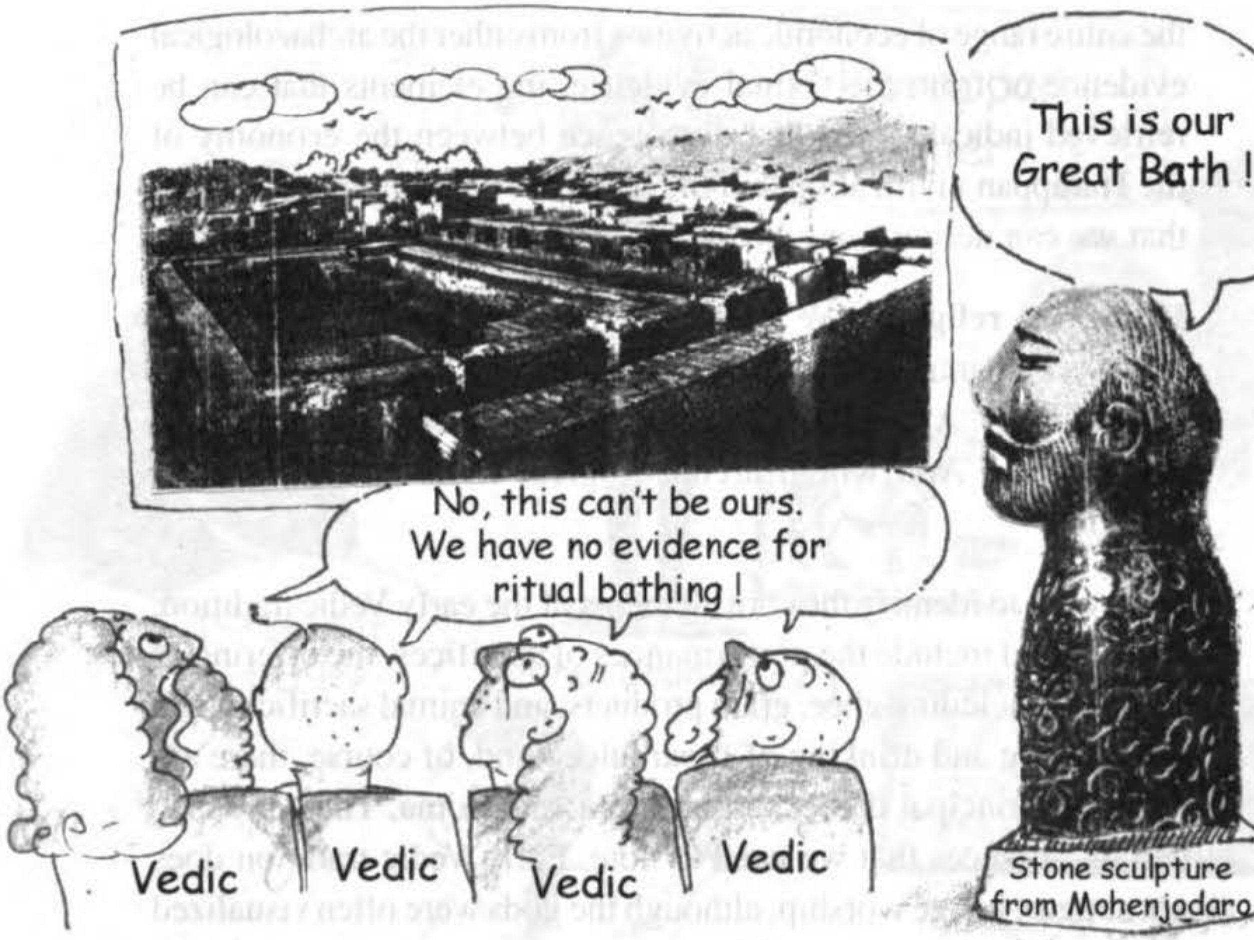
Harappan religion: We have seen that the early Vedic tradition consists of mantras from which we can reconstruct religious beliefs and practices. Are these reflected in the archaeology of Harappan settlements? And which archaeological finds do we label as religious?

If we were to identify the core elements of the early Vedic tradition, these would include the performances of sacrifices, the offering of oblations including ghee, grain products, and animal sacrifices, and the pressing and drinking of *soma* juice. And, of course, there are the three principal deities, Agni, Indra, and Soma. There are also certain absences that we need to note. Early Vedic tradition does not suggest image worship, although the gods were often visualized in anthropomorphic terms. There is also no question of worship in temples.

And what about the Harappan evidence? It has often been suggested that the animals represented on the seals had a religious significance. This is possible, though by no means certain. If this is so, it is interesting that the most frequently represented animal seems to be a one-horned creature, which archaeologists call the unicorn (*ekasrnga*). There is no description of such a mythical animal in early Vedic texts.

Besides, we have certain enigmatic architectural structures. Perhaps the best-known of these is the Great Bath at Mohenjodaro. This is a unique structure, and it has been suggested that it was probably used for ritual bathing. This is a practice for which we have no evidence in the early Vedic tradition.

We also have finds of terracotta sculptures of women. These are



often called mother goddesses. We do not know whether these images were actually worshipped as mother goddesses, but if they were, this would also be different from the early Vedic tradition, where the worship of goddesses was of marginal importance.

Fire altars have been found at some Harappan sites, including Lothal in Gujarat, and Kalibangan in Rajasthan. These have not been found in major settlements such as Harappa and Mohenjodaro. Can we then suggest that Vedic rituals were performed in some areas, but not in others? The answer might be more complicated. We need to remember that many people have had traditions of worshipping the fire, and performing sacrifices. And these rituals are not automatically Vedic.

To most of the questions with which we began:

- Is the language used on the seals Sanskrit?

• Is the Sarasvati the nucleus of the Harappan civilization?

• Is the horse one of the crucial animals in the civilization?

The answer is, most unlikely.

To the other two questions:

• Does the economy of the Harappan civilization resemble that known from the early Vedic tradition?

• Are the religious beliefs and practices of the Harappan civilization and those known from the early Vedic tradition identical?

We can respond in the negative.

There remains the larger question of why is there this desperate attempt to claim that the Harappan civilization is Vedic, in spite of a wealth of evidence to the contrary. We will return to this question. But before that, let us look more closely at the understanding of Vedic society that is projected, and see whether it does, in fact, conform to the evidence of the texts.

What was Vedic Society Like?

Those who try and equate the Harappan civilization with the evidence from the early Vedic tradition also project a certain understanding of Vedic society. They equate Vedic society with Aryan society; they often argue that women had a special place in this society, and that *varna* distinctions existed from this time, although they were not necessarily rigid. Besides, they seem allergic to the term tribe, and refuse to use it to describe the social institutions for which we have evidence.

Before we look at specific elements, it is useful to remind ourselves that there was no one Vedic society. The enormous body of Vedic literature developed over a very long span of time, and in different regions. There was also a shift in social values and norms over a period of time. So the concerns and the attitudes of the authors of

the *Rigveda* are often different from those of the authors of the Dharma Sutras. In other words, if we look at the entire body of literature, we can trace changes. We also need to remember the social background of the authors, the fact that they were priests, and that very often the texts mirrored their concerns and preoccupations. With this in mind, let us turn to specific issues.

Tracking Down the Aryans: Very often, the authors of the Vedas are designated as the Aryans. It is perhaps time to see whether this is an appropriate definition or not. The term *arya* has acquired significance in fairly recent times, over the last two hundred years or so. It is used in Sanskrit (we will return to this in a while), and when Europeans began studying Sanskrit and realized that it had certain similarities with European languages, they suggested that there was a large group of languages, which they called Indo-European, within which they identified a sub-group of languages called Indo-Aryan. This sub-group included those who spoke Iranian, as well as those who spoke Sanskrit and related languages.

This identification of language-groups, often called language families, was an exciting discovery. But it raised several questions as well. Perhaps the most important of these was whether those who spoke identical or related languages shared a common blood. This was a particularly urgent question in a situation where those who spoke languages like English were ruling over those who spoke languages derived from Sanskrit, which was the case in the nineteenth century. As may be expected, there were and are no easy answers to the question. But, if there is any consensus that we can work with, it is that language and race are not identical.

But, more pertinent to the present discussion, we need to focus on what was meant by the term *arya* in the early and the later Vedic traditions. To start with, we need to know that the term *arya* was one of several terms available to describe one's identity, and it was by no means the most important one. The term occurs about thirty times in the *Rigveda*, and when we remember that the text consisted


5000
1000
1500
1930

of several thousand verses, we realize that thirty is a rather small number. Terms of identity that were used fairly commonly were *jana* and *vis*. Both these terms have often been translated as tribe. To give an example, people claimed to belong to the Bharata *jana* or *vis*, or the Puru *jana* or *vis*. Another form of identity was in terms of family or clan. Seers were usually identified as belonging to families or clans, such as those of Atri, Gotama, Visvamitra and Vasistha.

Even when the term *arya* was used, it occurs only in certain specific contexts. Usually, the term is found in hymns addressed to Indra, and generally, these refer to how Indra helped the Aryans to defeat the *dasas* or the *dasyus*. Scholars have examined these references carefully, and feel that the difference between the *aryas* and the *dasas* was cultural. They spoke different languages, and probably had different religious practices.

It is also important to remember that the *arya-dasa* conflict is not the only, or even the major conflict mentioned in the early Vedic tradition. More often than not, the composers of mantras were preoccupied with trying to ensure the victory of their own tribe, or the prosperity of their clan, often at the cost of other tribes and clans.

Did the situation change in the later Vedic tradition? To some extent, yes. While the term *arya* is occasionally used, the *arya* is regarded as being opposed to the shudra. It does seem that in such references, *arya* is used to indicate the first three *varnas*, the brahmana, kshatriya and vaishya. While we do have references to attempts to subordinate the shudra by the *arya*, we have many more instances suggesting conflict and tension between the brahmana and the kshatriya on the one hand, and the kshatriya and the vaishya on the other. So, once again, it seems as if the *arya*-shudra divide was not the only or even the major division in society.

In later traditions, including Buddhism, the term *arya* or *ajja* was

often used to indicate somebody who was noble or virtuous. So it seems to have been connected with a distinctive life style.

We can then conclude that

- while the term *arya* is used in the Vedic tradition, it is not the sole, or even the most important identity that is claimed

- there were a range of social identities that were in use and social conflict and tension was also quite common

- however, these conflicts were not necessarily only between those who considered themselves *aryas* and the rest

Women and the Vedic Tradition: We are all familiar with the perception that women held a place of honour in Vedic society. This perception is supposedly based on the existence of women seers in the early Vedic tradition, and of women who participated in philosophical discussions in the later tradition. Hence, it is argued, we can be certain that women had access to education.

Other arguments advanced are that the age of marriage seems to have been relatively high, and we do not have instances of sati.



Besides, there may have been provision for widow remarriage. And finally, we are told that women had rights to perform rituals: in fact, no sacrifice was complete without the presence of the wife. Let us examine these arguments more closely, and also look at the possibility of alternative scenarios.

To start with, as we have already seen, the number of women seers recognized in the early Vedic tradition is abysmally low: around one percent of the total number of compositions compiled in the

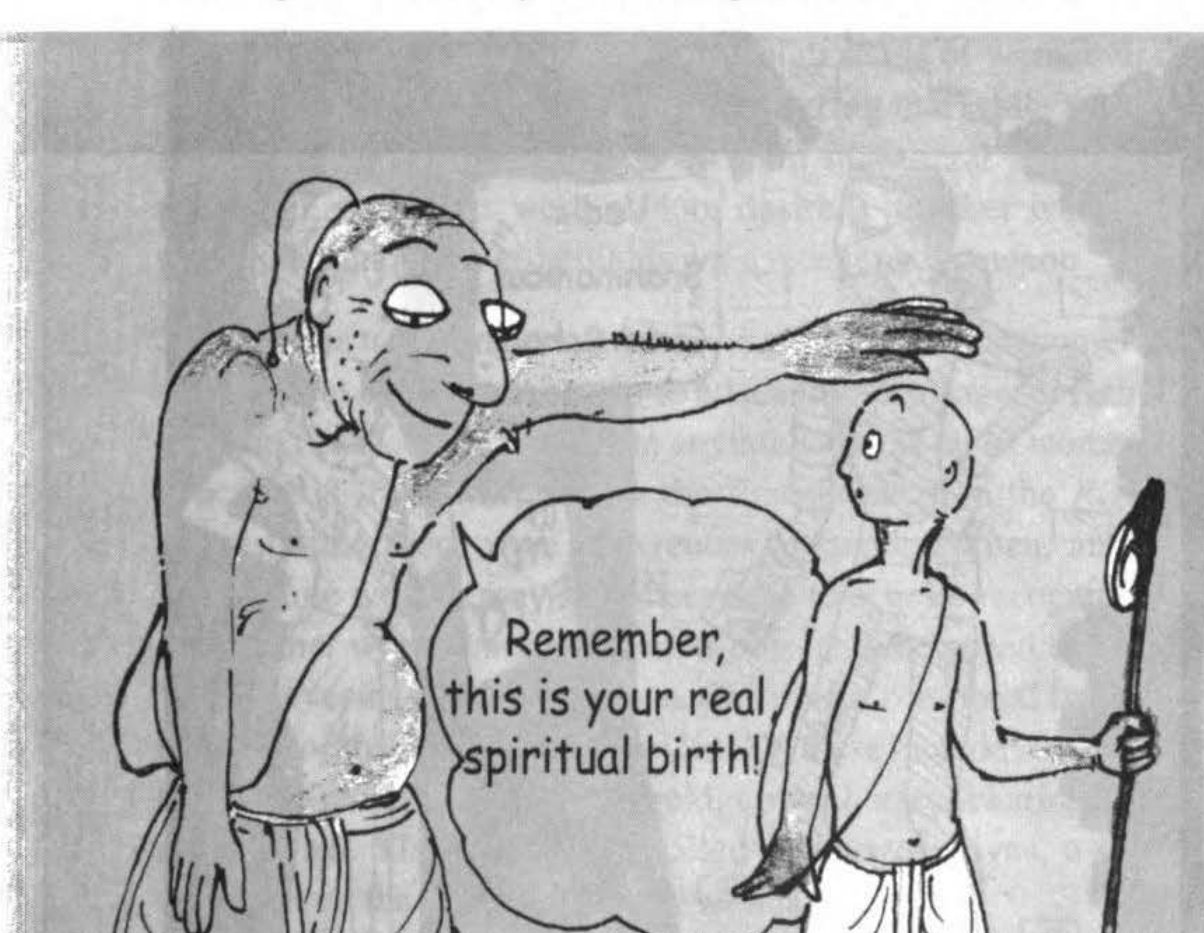
How were children produced?

The answers to this question are quite varied within the Vedic tradition. At one level, there was a more or less reluctant acceptance of the necessity of physical intercourse to produce children. At the same time, and especially in the later Vedic tradition, women were regarded as inferior beings, and attempts were made to regulate contact with them. Besides, *brahmacharya* was often valorised as a marker of social status, and women were viewed as a threat to the purity of men. Simultaneously, we find a variety of other 'means' being recommended to produce children. These include the use of mantras, the performance of sacrifices, and in some instances, acquiring knowledge of certain texts. Women did not have direct access to any of these strategies. As such, their role in giving birth was not recognized.

And then we have the curious ritual of the second birth, the *upanayana*, which was recommended for men of the first three *varnas*. In all likelihood, it was generally performed for brahmans. In this ritual, the young boy was supposed to be reborn from the priest, and this second, spiritual birth was considered to be superior to the physical birth. Once again, women were denied a role in this process. We can see then how systematic attempts were made to deny women control over their reproductive powers.

Rigveda can be attributed to women. The figure does not allow us to generalize about women's access to education in general, and the composition and compilation of the sacred tradition in particular.

If we examine the question of marriage, it is true that the analogies used in early Vedic mantras seem to indicate relatively flexible sexual relations. However, by the time we come to the Dharma Sutras, norms are laid down for ideal marriages. These indicate that marriages were ideally to be arranged between men and women



who belonged to the same *varna*, and that the best form of marriage was that of *kanyadana*, which involved the gifting of the woman. In this, 'ideal' form of marriage, the woman was denied any say in the matter, and was treated as an object, although definitely a valuable one, to be given away and to be received in a transaction that was surrounded with and sanctified by rituals.

The question of women's participation in rituals is as problematic.



As we have seen earlier, women probably did not have the right to chant mantras. In fact, women seers were the exception rather than the norm. Yet, the wife of the sacrificer was regarded as a vital presence in the ritual.

How do we explain this? To start with, we need to remember that women were granted access to the ritual only as wives. Mothers, daughters, or sisters, had no ritual roles assigned to them. Wives were regarded as critical resources from the point of view of reproduction. That is why they were used, very often as ritual objects, in the ritual, so as to ensure the birth of children for the sacrificer. Moreover, we have virtually no evidence of women taking the initiative to perform rituals. As such, we would perhaps be mistaken if we generalize from the presence of the wife in the ritual and argue that this is an indication of the high status of women in the Vedic tradition. It is also worth remembering that while there are prayers to ensure the birth of children in general and sons in particular, daughters were seldom desired. In other words, the prejudice against the girl child is not a recent phenomenon.

So the Vedic tradition does not necessarily indicate that women had a high status in terms of access to education, marriage, or rights to perform rituals. Does it indicate anything else as far as women are concerned? In fact it does. In the first place, even the *Rigveda* suggests that there were differences amongst women, and that while some women may have been able to acquire recognition as seers, other women were treated as objects to be gifted to priests. We have verses that are known as *danastutis*, composed by priests in praise of the generous donor. Usually, these include lists of gifts that were received, including gold, cows, horses, chariots, carts, and women. The women are called *vadhus* or wives, a telling comment on the status of women within marriage.

There are other problems that we need to take into account. We have seen that the early Vedic tradition consists of prayers. Most of these are addressed to gods. Goddesses are marginal to the tradition. If the relative importance of gods and goddesses is any indication, then women were probably regarded as relatively insignificant from the point of view of the brahmanas who composed many of these texts.

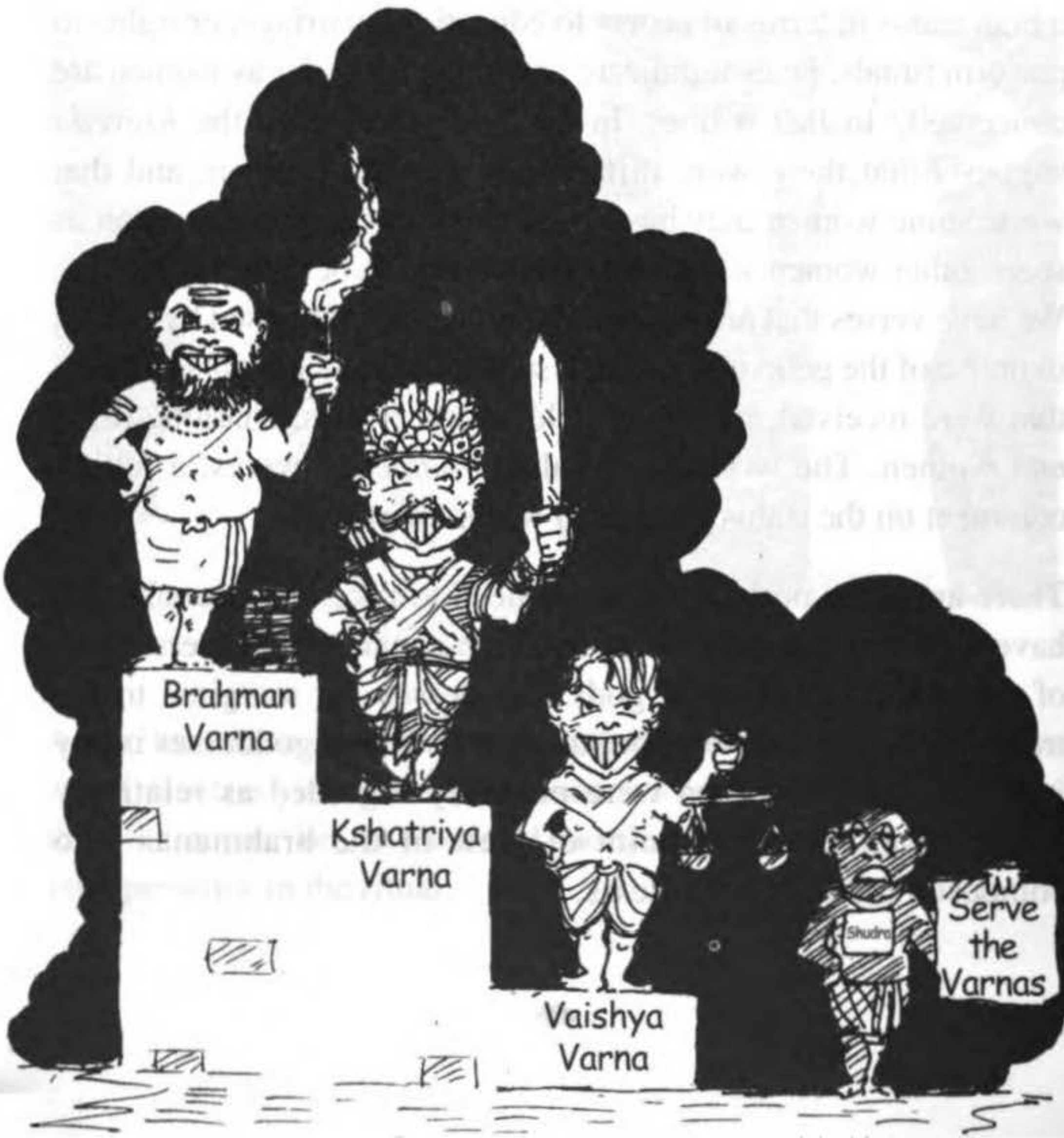
To summarize:

• the evidence of the Vedic tradition suggests that women seers were the exception rather than the rule

• there is evidence to indicate that women were regarded as valuable objects, to be given and received, to strengthen the bonds between men

• women were valued as wives, and were expected to be present in rituals, especially when prayers were offered in order to obtain children in general and sons in particular.

What about Varna? Those who somewhat mistakenly argue for the existence of an ideal situation as far as women are concerned are almost equally insistent on the existence of *varna* categories even in the early Vedic tradition.



Let us look at these assertions more closely. If we turn to the *Rigveda* we find only one instance where all the four *varnas* are mentioned. This is in a famous *sukta*, known as the *purushasukta*, which describes how primeval man was sacrificed to produce the cosmic and the social order. In that context, there is a verse that refers to the brahmana being produced from the mouth, the kshatriya from the arms, the vaishya from the thighs, and the shudra from the feet of this man.

This verse is the only place in the *Rigveda* where the vaishya and the shudra are mentioned. Even the terms brahmana and kshatriya are very rare in the text, and do not occur more than a dozen times. So although priests and chiefs are mentioned, they are not necessarily identified as brahmanas and kshatriyas. We also need to remember that the *purushasukta* is part of the last section of the *Rigveda*, which was probably added on later. The idea of the *purushasukta* became influential, and was repeated and elaborated time and again. This was probably because it offered a justification for the existence of the *varna* order, and the social differences and oppression that were a part of the system.

The Dharma Sutras lay down the 'duties' of the *varnas*. The brahmana was expected to study and teach (the Vedas), perform sacrifices, and make and receive gifts. The kshatriya and the vaishya were also expected to study, perform sacrifices, and make gifts. Additionally, the kshatriya was expected to protect people, collect taxes and administer punishment. The vaishya's additional duties included engaging in agriculture, cattle-rearing, and trade. The shudra was assigned the duty of serving the other three varnas. We do not know how far these provisions were actually implemented. There is likely to have been resistance to their acceptance.

Does the Vedic tradition reflect the values of a tribal society? Perhaps it is best to begin addressing this question by discussing what we understand by a tribal society. Tribal societies have been and are varied: however, they share certain common features:


Gurudev, why is it that you want me to cut off my thumb ?
So that it is always thumbs up for the Aryans !
Hastinapur 8 miles

usually, subsistence is derived from hunting, gathering wild produce, fishing, pastoralism, or simple agriculture. Related to this, what is obtained or produced is generally consumed by the people themselves, and some of it is exchanged as gifts. There is virtually no system of taxation, and markets, likewise, are unknown. Differences in wealth are relatively less sharp.

In terms of social relations, members of tribes often have a very rich social life based on intensive interaction. Cultural and ritual traditions are also both unique and well-developed. In terms of political structures, tribes often function through assemblies and through leaders, who may be ritual specialists, or those skilled in economic activities. However, permanent positions of leadership/rulership are usually absent.

Many scholars have argued that the early Vedic tradition seems to reflect the values of a tribal society. While there are indications of difference of status, these are not as sharp as they become later. Also, it is evident that systems of taxation were virtually unknown, as were markets. It is only in the later Vedic tradition that we find the beginnings of these developments as well as regular mention of kings.

And yet, there are many scholars who vehemently oppose any attempt to refer to tribes in the Vedic context. This opposition stems from their own assumption that tribal societies are somehow inferior to other societies. As such, if the Vedas are to be projected as the epitome of human advancement, then any possibility of there being signs of tribal societies has to be denied at all costs. So it does seem that the evidence on social institutions that can be gleaned from Vedic texts is deliberately distorted. Before examining why this happens, let us look at the issue of Vedic religion.

How Vedic are our Religious Traditions?

Just as we cannot talk of a single Vedic society, so too, it is difficult to talk of a single Vedic religious tradition. Nevertheless, it may be



worth defining certain core elements of the Vedic tradition, as this will allow us to compare these with elements of other religious traditions.

• We have seen that three deities were particularly important in the early Vedic tradition, namely, Agni, Indra, and Soma.

• We have also seen that the bulk of the later Vedic tradition is preoccupied with the correct performance of elaborate rituals: how are mantras to be chanted, what is their significance, how are rituals to be performed, what is the correct sequence, what might happen if these rules are violated, and so on.

• At the same time, there were other strands that can be traced, especially within the later Vedic tradition. We have seen that there is evidence for speculation regarding the relevance or otherwise of the sacrificial cult, especially in the Upanishads.

• And, finally, a variety of domestic rituals were incorporated within the Grhya Sutras.

Let us look at the fate of each of these elements.

What Became of The Principal Deities? To start with Agni, Indra, and Soma, we find that they appear to be of marginal importance in later Hindu traditions. Agni is invoked on ritual occasions, especially in certain forms of marriage, and in the disposal of the dead through cremation, but has little significance on other occasions. You will rarely find a temple dedicated to Agni, or even an image of Agni.

Indra's fate is even more intriguing. He continues to be mentioned as the king of the gods in a number of traditions, but does not appear to be a terribly powerful king. We find him being mentioned in the epics, in Buddhist literature, and in the Puranas. The Puranas were compiled about fifteen hundred years ago, in different parts of the country. As many as eighteen Puranas are recognized. If we examine the way Indra is presented in the Puranas, two things strike

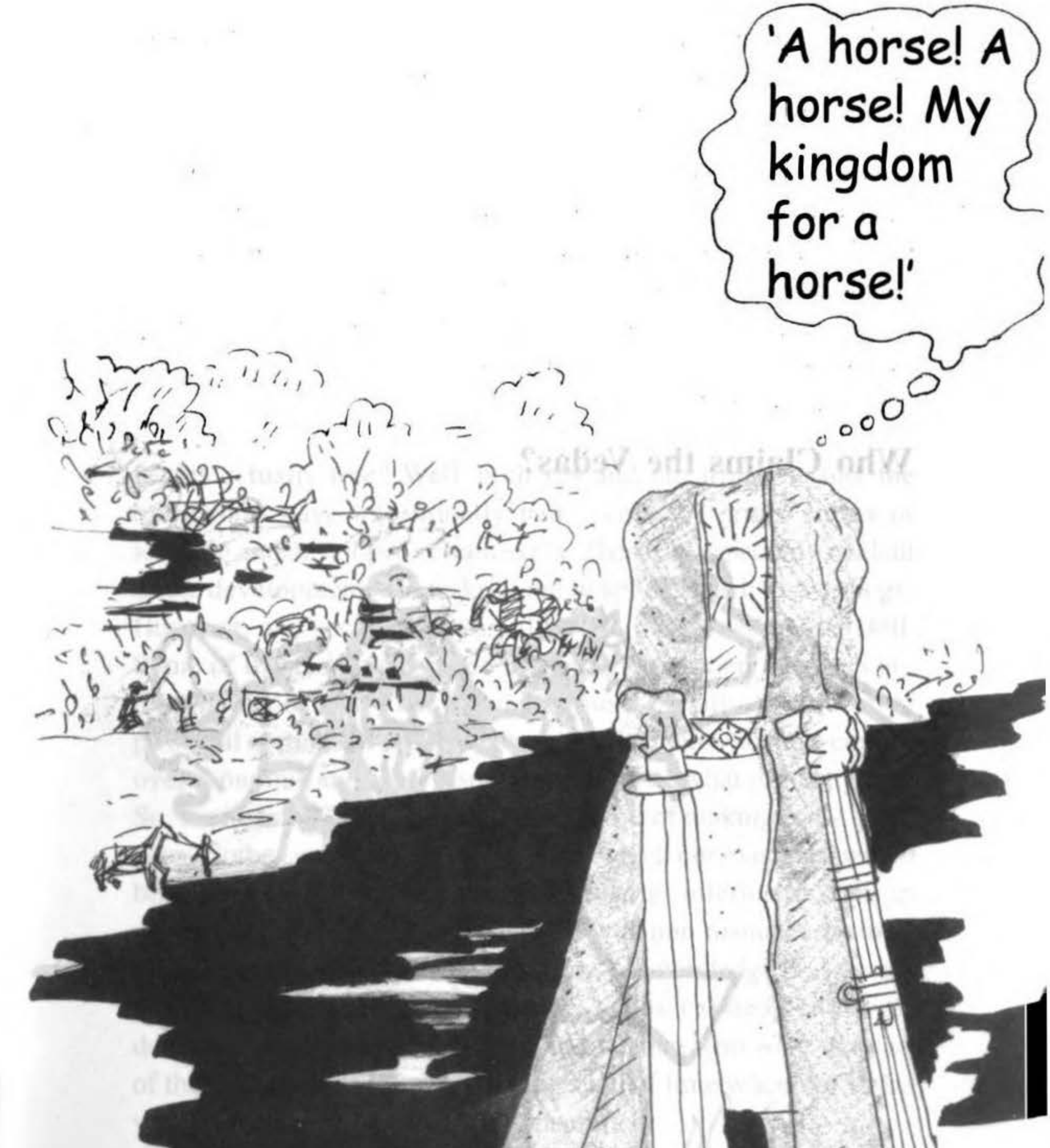
us. One is that he is shown as being in awe of ascetics, who practice severe penance. He frequently tries to disrupt their meditation by sending *apsaras*. He is also shown to be in conflict with new, non-Vedic heroes/deities such as Krishna-Vasudeva, who often defeat him. This Indra seems to be very different in character from the Vedic Indra, who is invariably shown to be victorious in battle, and as a valiant hero. As in the case of Agni, you will rarely find a temple or an image of Indra.

And in the case of Soma, we find stray references to the performance of the soma sacrifice for several centuries, but it seems to have lost its popularity, and today, most priests are not even sure which plant should be identified as the soma plant. So, we can conclude that the three principal deities of the early Vedic tradition gradually lost their importance. This could have happened only when people stopped offering prayers to them.

The Fate of the Sacrifice: We have seen that the mantras of the early Vedic texts were meant to be used in sacrifices. Some of these were small-scale routine sacrifices, such as the daily offering into the fire, known as the *agnihotra*, others, such as the *ashvamedha* and the *rajasuya*, were elaborate rituals that could have lasted for over a year.

Each sacrifice, whether big or small, could be performed only if certain minimum requirements were met. These included engaging priests who were versed in conducting the ritual, setting up the sacrificial fire, mobilizing the resources that were required, which would include grain, animals, wood, objects of metal, cloth, ghee, other animal produce, and inviting people to attend the sacrifice.

We have seen that texts like the Brahmanas and the Srauta Sutras discuss details of the ritual at great length. However, the Upanishads express doubt as to the efficacy and the necessity of sacrifice. And these critiques become far more explicit in other early Indian religious traditions, such as Jainism and Buddhism. These


'A horse! A horse! My kingdom for a horse!'

challenges probably had an impact, and while stray references to the performance of sacrifices can be found, these rituals lost their popularity over the centuries.

So, we have a situation where neither the Vedic gods, nor the Vedic rituals remained relevant. How and why religious beliefs and practices change is a complicated question and there are no uniform, simple answers. We shall see later what took the place of Vedic religion and how alternatives emerged. For the time being we may say that it is not possible to trace a simple, linear development from the Vedas to the Puranas.

Who Claims the Vedas?



But we also need to raise another question. To whom do the Vedas really belong? We have seen that most of the texts were written by and for brahmanas. Vast sections of the population have had very little to do with their composition, compilation and preservation. These include women, men of the so-called lower *varnas*, as well as men and women who have never been part of the *varna* order, people often referred to as tribal populations. So, when the Vedas are proclaimed as the fountainhead of all achievements, what is actually being suggested is that the brahmanas have in fact been at the forefront of all kinds of discoveries.

Is this actually true? Well, both yes and no. It is true that the brahmanas have traditionally had access to certain forms of learning and developed certain skills. These are especially evident in the development of Sanskrit, and in spheres such as astrology. However, any society has varied forms of knowledge and skill. Some of these are recognized as prestigious, whereas others are not. Who decides what is prestigious? Usually, members of powerful sections of society, generally elite men who have control over economic and other resources, decide on what is prestigious. So, for instance, basic skills, such as those of making tools, pots, pans, clothes, or even farming, without which our existence would be almost impossible, are often regarded as inferior to skills in performing rituals, or those associated with non-manual activities. It is obvious that many skills and forms of knowledge that are not directly acknowledged within the Vedas existed, and were developed and preserved by men and women who were not part of the priestly order during the long span of time when the Vedas were composed, compiled and transmitted.

How do the present-day self-proclaimed owners of the Vedic tradition handle this problem? They adopt a two-fold strategy. On the one hand, they ignore much of what is non-Vedic and non-brahmanical, thus denying its existence. On the other hand, they claim that everything that is significant can in fact, be derived from the Vedas.

We have seen how the second strategy operates: it has led to entirely untenable attempts to match the textual evidence of the Vedic texts with the spectacular archaeological evidence of the Harappan civilization. As is obvious, the existence of the Harappan civilization cannot be denied. It is also apparent that it was amongst the most advanced of contemporary civilizations. Therefore, all possible means are devised to claim that it is Vedic. As we have seen, most of the claims made to suggest that the authors of the Vedas were also the authors of the Harappan civilization are untenable. Clearly, if we are to look for archaeological evidence for a Vedic age, we cannot turn to the Harappan civilization.

We have seen that the strategy of asserting Vedic origins is also used to argue that a whole range of religious traditions are actually derived from Vedic religion. While some traditions, such as Buddhism, may have developed in part in dialogue with Vedic ideas, others were probably non-Vedic cults that were gradually incorporated within the Brahmanical framework. The attempt to deny these diverse origins is in fact part of a strategy for claiming a monopoly on religious beliefs and practices. If most major beliefs are in fact derived from the Vedas, and the brahmanas are the ones who have a 'true' understanding of these texts, then they alone have the right to claim control over the followers of these traditions. And those religions that cannot be accommodated within this framework, such as Christianity and Islam, can then be projected as 'foreign' religions. This then prepares the groundwork for their persecution.

The Challenge of Appropriating the Vedic

We can also look at another dimension of the problem. Is everything Vedic good? Here we find that there is a certain ambivalence. Most of those who lay claim to the Vedic tradition work with a notion of an ideal or a model society and stretch, pull, and even suppress evidence from the Vedic texts to bring it into line with this ideal. It is perhaps not surprising to find that this is a model


AYODHYA
8 MILES

where social difference is treated as legitimate and valued.

One of the components of this ideal is the category of *arya*, which has acquired connotations of dominance and power in the context of nineteenth and twentieth century world politics. This is both adopted, and magnified out of all proportion to the evidence of its use in Vedic texts. Another component of the ideal social order was the *varna* order. Hence, we have an insistence on the existence of this institution almost since eternity. And, as an adjunct, any suggestion that early Vedic texts may reflect the aspirations of a relatively egalitarian, tribal society, are ignored.

What happens with the evidence on gender relations is a combination of these strategies. On the one hand, evidence indicative of what is regarded as the high status of women is blown out of all proportions. On the other hand, evidence that points to a more complex scenario is brushed under the carpet.

Do we need to go back to the Vedas? By now it is probably obvious that the notion of a Vedic age is rather problematic. It is problematic because:

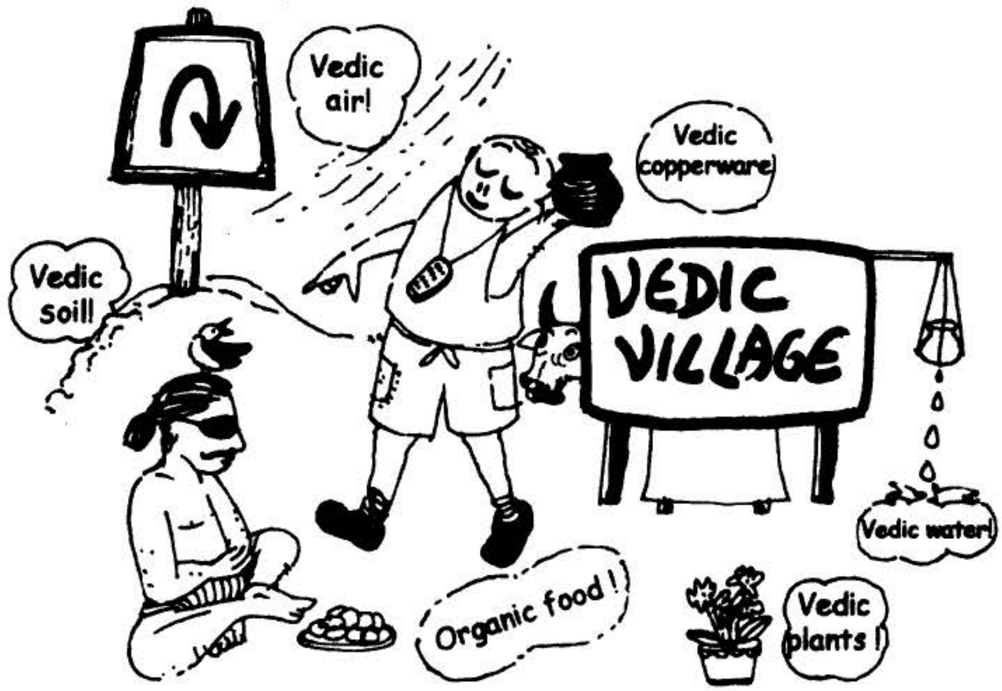
• the Vedas, no matter how we define them, were composed by a relatively limited section of society. The concerns and preoccupations of other social categories are only indirectly represented in these texts

• large sections of the population of the subcontinent have followed non-Vedic traditions

• The Vedas are concerned with only a part of the subcontinent

But do we still need to go back to the Vedas? Yes, if by that we mean that scholars should be able to study these texts, which are amongst the earliest known texts in world history. We should be able to understand and analyze them, and make our findings available to interested lay people. But if, by going back to the Vedas we mean reviving Vedic practices, the answer, surely, is no. This

is because it is futile, unnecessary and impossible to revive Vedic practices in the twenty-first century. Can we even think of performing an *ashvamedha* sacrifice today?



And if, by going back to the Vedas we mean that we have to claim Vedic origins for any and everything that we may value, that, in turn is something that needs to be discouraged. As we have seen, these claims to Vedic origins are, more often than not, unjustified. These claims are usually related to the preoccupations with asserting the supremacy of brahmanas, and tend to be casteist, and sexist. As such, they are closely related to political agendas of patriarchal, brahmanical dominance, which need to be scrutinized and challenged.

So, whenever it is asserted that something is Vedic, we need to be ready to examine these claims before dismissing them. We must continue to ask who is making these claims, what are these claims, and measure these claims against available evidence. We should be willing to undertake the tedious, sometimes repetitive, and often arduous task of scrutinizing these assertions, because this is one means of meeting the political challenge of those who would question the very foundations of our democracy.

Smriti, Puranas, Hinduism



We have seen so far what kind of distortion can result from attempts to trace everything that is 'good' back to the Vedas. We will begin our discussion in this section by looking at how misleading it can be to search for the root of all religions—particularly of Hinduism—in the Vedas.

Why did the Vedic religion gradually decline?

It is difficult to be certain about times so ancient, but the popularity of *yajna*-centric Vedic religion probably began to wane around the sixth century BC. The reasons for the gradual decline of the Vedic religion have to be sought in the changes taking place within the production system, and in the social and intellectual life of the



time. Let us look at what the main changes were:

• The surplus resulting from the extensive use of the plough in agriculture changed the very basis of economic life. Socio-economic life now began to be dependent on agriculture and exchange of agricultural produce rather than on pastoralism.

• The caste system became firmly entrenched in society towards the end of the Vedic age. With the advent of iron and the resultant



advances in the manufacture of weapons, the power of the kshatriyas increased. Much of the wealth produced by the vaishyas and the shudras was squandered away by the brahmanas and the kshatriyas in their brutal *yajnas* and wars. Continuous fighting led to the disruption of trading activities, which made people gradually turn away from war and hanker for peace.

• Notwithstanding the increasing importance of commerce, it did not receive complete brahmanical approval. Sea-faring was prohibited. Some urban practices and institutions were also frowned

upon. As a result, the brahmanas got cut off from a large and influential section of society.

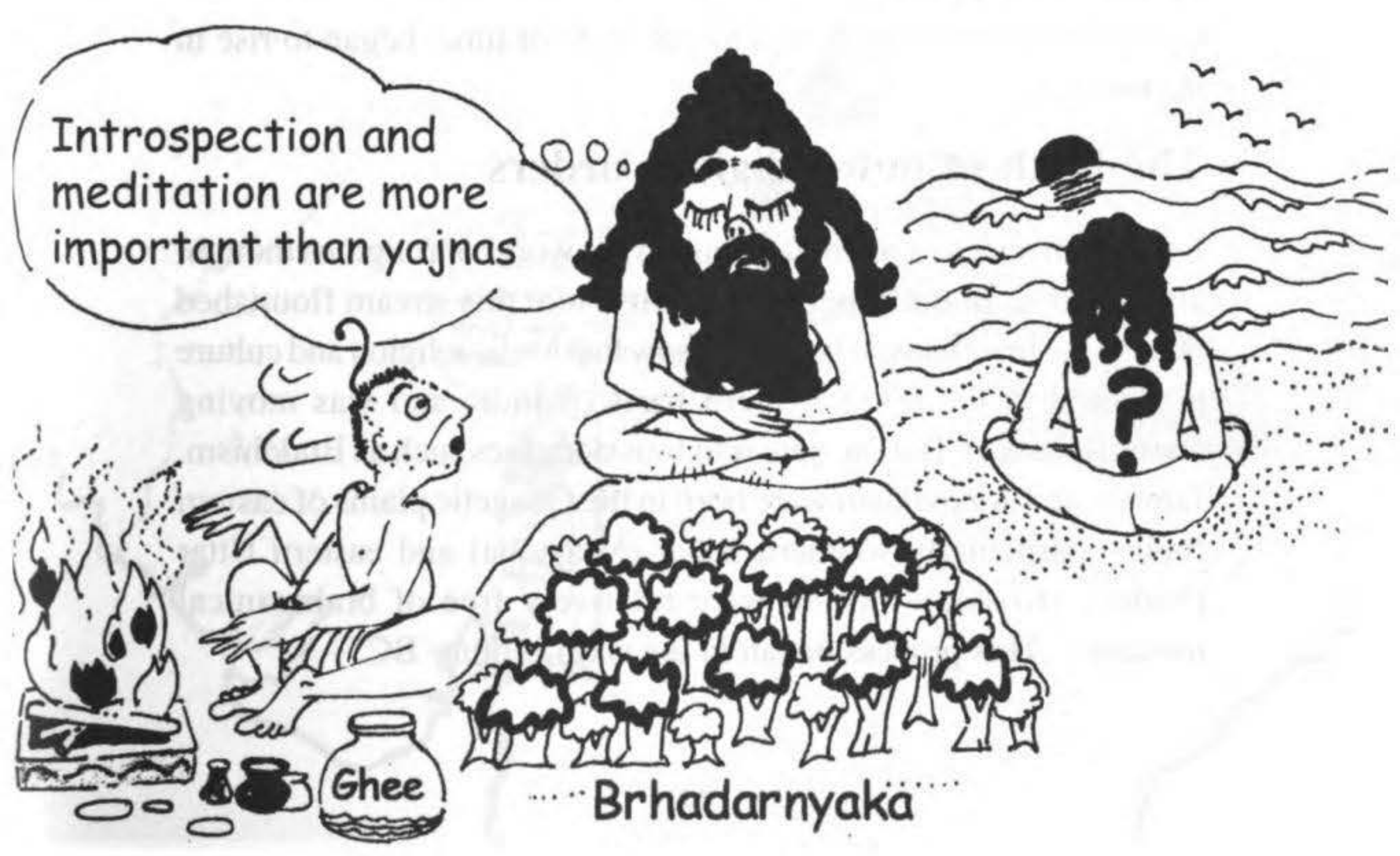
• Increasing poverty and discrimination on the basis of caste and wealth gave rise to a sense of failure and despair among many sections of the people.

• Vedic religion was losing its vitality. *Yajnas* assumed greater importance and became even more complex. This led to an increase in the power and prestige of the priests.

What did the Upanishads question?

Against this backdrop, at the end of the Vedic age, a few thinkers started speculating afresh about the place of man in the universe and the goal of human life. The reflection of these philosophical thoughts can be found in the earliest Upanishads—some of the greatest examples of Vedic literature—composed during the final phase of the Vedic period.

The *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* is where the immortality of the soul was mentioned for the first time. According to this theory,



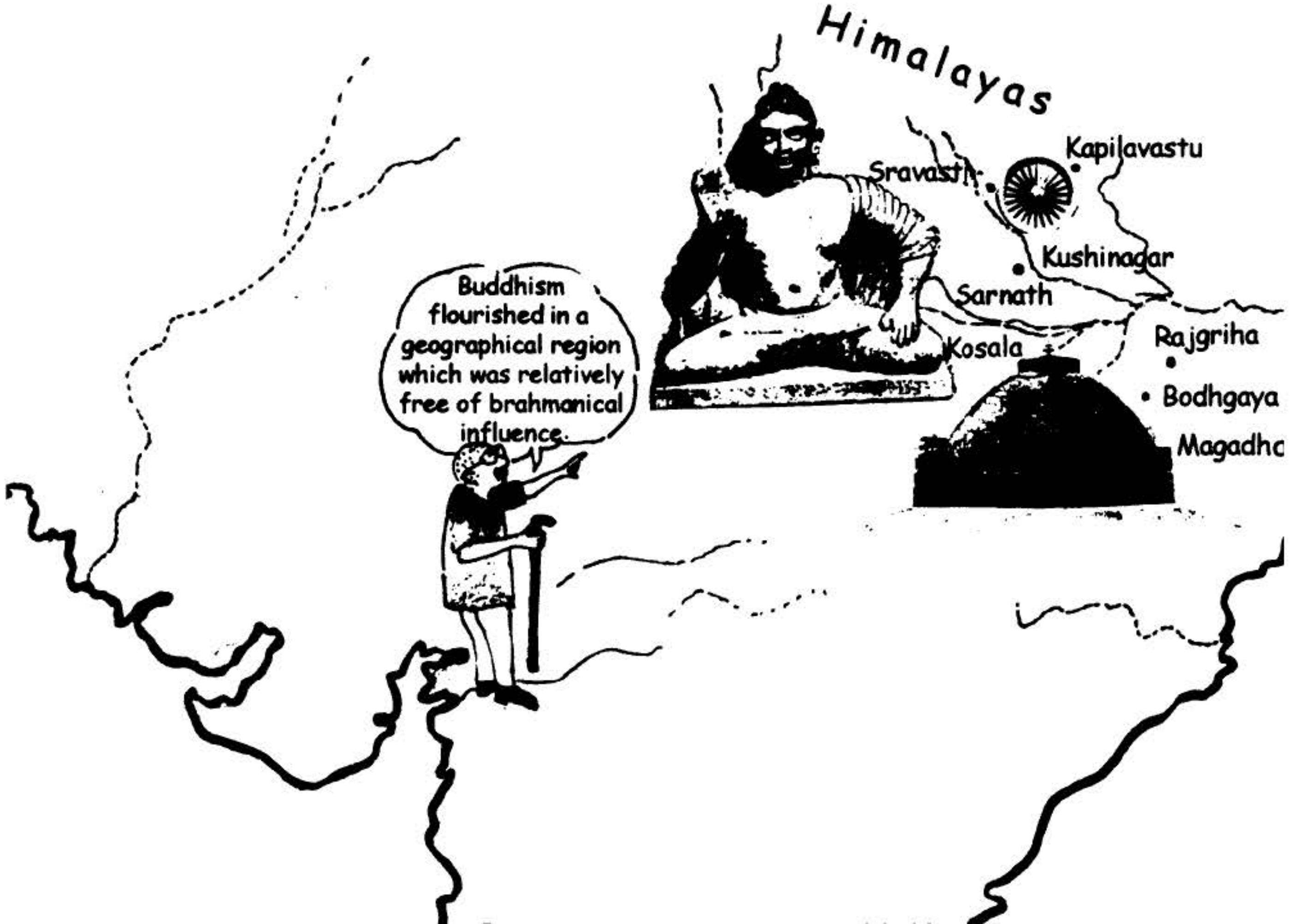
with the rebirth of a creature the soul transfers its residence to a new body and the quality of the new life is determined by the good or bad deeds committed by the individual in his previous life. With the diffusion of the ideas of karma and rebirth, worldly pleasures became relatively insignificant to man. The optimism of the *Rigveda* came to be replaced by a sense of pessimism. It was argued that the suffering intrinsic to human existence can be transcended only by breaking free of the cycle of life and death—something that the *yajna* rituals alone could not ensure. It was possible by acquiring knowledge and understanding of the nature of existence and eventual salvation of the soul. Meditation was one way of getting closer to this understanding. That is why the Aranyakas, texts written almost at the same time as the Upanishads, places more importance on meditation than on *yajna*.

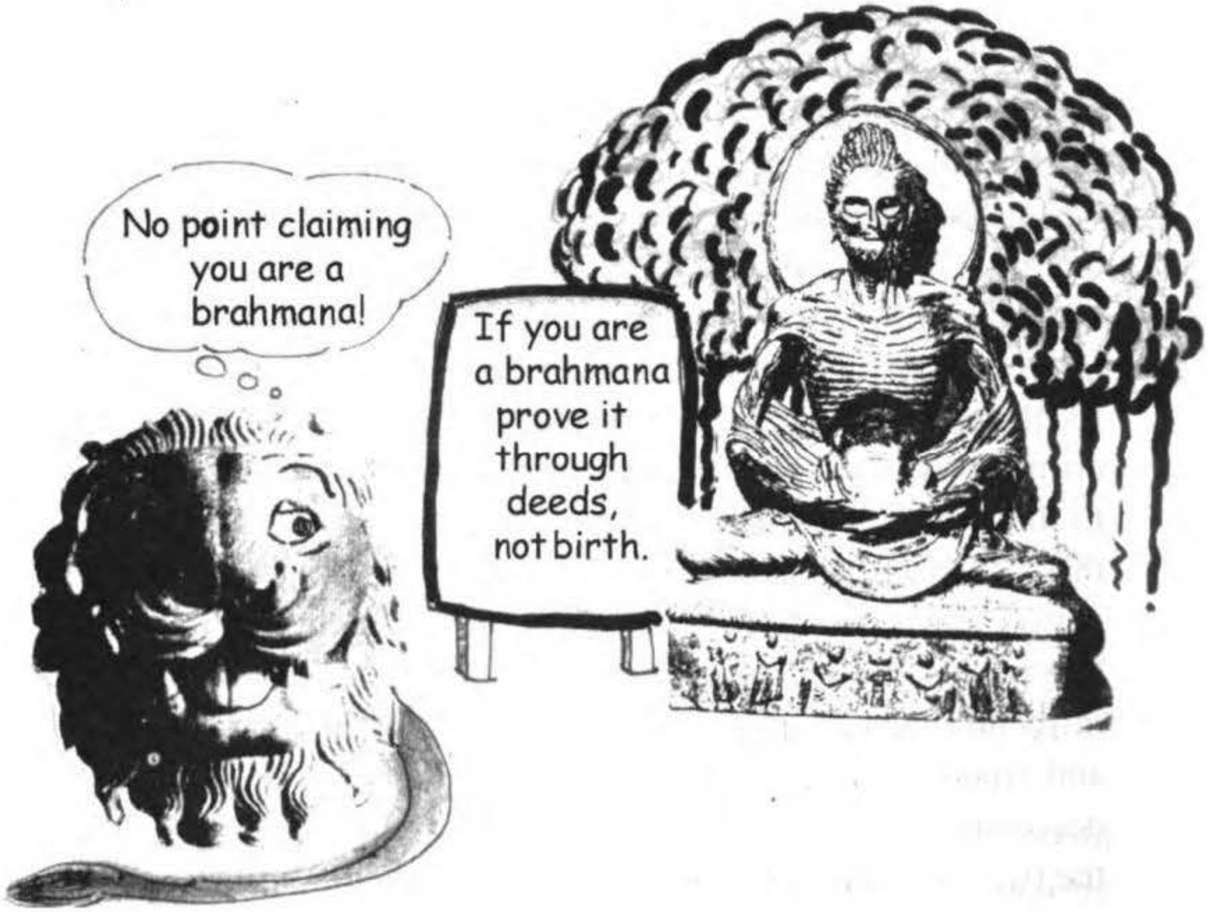
Let us look at the other direct fallouts of this introspection within the Vedic religion. Having no recollection of past lives, men were unable to establish a causal relationship between karma and its fruit. He learnt to think of himself as the victim of an all-powerful and tyrannical fate. Thus gods such as Shiva, and his assistant Yama or Kritanta (a name which literally means 'fate'), who became branded as regulators of the eternal cycle of time, began to rise in importance.

The birth of new religious orders

Let us turn now to a parallel stream in the world of religious thought and practice. In the geographical sense too, this stream flourished outside the brahmanical belt. We know that Vedic religion and culture prospered in the north-western parts of India and was moving towards the east. But the new religious doctrines such as Buddhism, Jainism and Ajeevikism were born in the Gangetic plains of eastern India—particularly southern Bihar (Magadha) and eastern Uttar Pradesh (Kosala)—which were relatively free of brahmanical influence. This process began in the sixth century BC.

We have noted earlier the fundamental changes that were taking place in the socio-economic life of north India at this time. The Upanishads were tracing new paths in the world of religion, while city-centric state systems were taking shape. A new class of rich and powerful people was emerging as a result of advances in agriculture and commerce, but brahmanical society had little respect for them. The emergence of so many anti-brahmanical religious doctrines at more or less the same time is usually seen as a reaction to the *yajna*-centric Vedic religion. But it must be remembered that the Upanishads marked the beginning of this reaction. For this reason, and because both Upanishadic brahmanism and Buddhism (we will use Buddhism as our example since it became the most influential among all the new religious orders) scorned rituals and espoused karma, many consider Buddhism to be the natural descendant of Upanishadic thought. It is hardly surprising that the two contemporary schools of thought should influence each other. But there are differences between the two which are just as significant as the similarities in their opinions and beliefs.





Therefore, it would be judicious to regard both of these as responses to the fundamental socio-economic changes in northern India rather than treat Buddhism as a mere byproduct of the Upanishads or a reaction to the Vedic religion.

Buddhism: The 500 years between the rise of the Mauryas and the decline of the Kushana dynasty can be regarded as the Buddhist age in Indian history. Not only did Buddhism spread to different parts of India during this period, thanks to the initiative of the Mauryan king Ashoka, but it also made a huge impact in Sri Lanka in the south and in the Greek provinces of west Asia. One of the main reasons for the popularity of Buddhism, perhaps, was that the Buddha tried to find a practical way to lead men from earthly sorrows to peace and salvation. That is why he advocated the adoption of the middle path in our daily existence. Besides,

- He questioned the very basis of brahmanical caste system, arguing that brahmanism cannot be acquired by birth; it has to be attained through karma.

• He placed the kshatriyas above the brahmanas in the social order, and recognized the wealthy vaishyas as elites of society.

• He gave women the respect that was their due, and even included them in the Sangha, a freedom of choice unthinkable in a society controlled by the brahmanas.

• He preached his religion simply and in the language of the common people.

Owing to theoretical and practical differences, the Buddhists split into two groups—the Heenayanas and the Mahayanas—during the period. The Mahayana established itself as the main branch of Buddhism in India and eventually, under the influence of Tantra, significantly transformed its original character. During the eighth to eleventh centuries, when the Pala dynasty was ruling in eastern India, the Buddhists regained their importance in this region. But the dominance of Buddhism had begun to decline from the Gupta period (fourth century AD). On the pan-Indian level, the Buddhists never again managed to thwart the growing authority of the brahmanas.

Revival of Brahmanism

What had happened to the Vedic religion at the time when northern India came under the pervasive influence of the liberal ideals of Buddhism and Jainism? Earlier in this book, under 'How Vedic are our scriptural rituals?', a discussion has been initiated on this subject.

One need not look beyond the brahmanical texts themselves to gauge the extent to which Vedic religion had fallen into disuse. The four Vedas, the Brahmanas, the Aranyakas and the Upanishads constitute the primary corpus of Vedic literature. In the period that followed, the Vedangas and the Sutras came to represent the major shift of the brahmanical literature. The Vedangas were written as companions to the Vedas to explain the correct meaning of the

Vedic texts. These are classified as 'Shiksha', 'Chhanda', 'Nirukta', 'Kalpa', 'Vyakarana' and 'Jyotisha'.

If we remember that many of these were written to preserve the correct diction of the Vedas and to provide the exact meanings of Vedic words, we can have some idea of the widening gulf between contemporary brahmanical society and original Vedic religion. The meaning of the instructions given in the early brahmanical texts about the observance of rituals became obscure with time. The Srauta Sutras were written to clarify these instructions, the Grhya Sutras were composed for the performance of domestic rituals, and the Dharma Sutras were meant to provide guidelines for the day-to-day conduct of individuals. It is quite clear that the larger brahmanical society was getting distant from the Vedic culture.

After the Sutras came the Dharmashastras, such as those attributed to Manu, Yajnavalkya etc. These texts outline in minute details the social duties of the members of brahmanical society in accordance with his caste and station in life (*varna* and *ashrama*). These are the law books of brahmanical society, the successors to the earlier Dharma Sutras. Similar texts were written later too, since old laws become obsolete with changes in society, and there must be ways for the making of new ones. These two categories of texts, along with the Grhya Sutras, which contain directions for the performance of the essential life-cycle rituals, have regulated brahmanical society for nearly 2,000 years.

Between the fifth century BC and the fifth century AD, the brahmanas were engaged in composing another set of texts which had a significant long-term effect. The two most important heroic tales of India are the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, which the wandering storytellers used to narrate for their living—from princely courts to village fairs. The brahmanas took charge of these stories and wrote two huge epics in Sanskrit based on these oral tales. While retaining the basic storyline, the brahmana poets introduced in the epics some significant new themes and ideas.



For instance, they invested the heroic protagonists like Rama and Krishna with divine attributes and status. They also inducted a number of scriptural codes on caste and gender into these epics, in particular the Mahabharata. Since these tales were regularly circulated by travelling storytellers like the Sutas and Charanas, the new brahmanical rules too began to gain currency, riding on the popular stories. And since these stories were now in Sanskrit, they easily slipped into brahmanical jurisdiction. This transformation of the popular tales went a long way in augmenting the social powers of the brahmanas.


Upper caste
Upper caste
Upper caste
Upper caste
Upper caste
Lower caste

The establishment of the Gupta empire: The Gupta empire was founded in north India in the earlier part of the fourth century AD. It is not known whether the Gupta rulers were brahmanas since they were completely silent about their caste identity. Even if they were not brahmanas, they lent their unqualified support to the brahmanical social order and religious systems. Samudragupta referred to himself as a Paramabhagavata. The Gupta kings adopted the brahmanical political ideal of the Chakravarti ruler, who is described in the Smritis as the representative of Vishnu on earth. They also adopted Gadura, Vishnu's *vahana*, as their emblem on the imperial seal, and placed Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, on the royal umbrella. They performed the *ashvamedha* ritual after annexing kingdoms, and some of them even minted coins to commemorate the event. Most important, the custom of honouring the brahmanas with donation of tax-free land gained popularity from this period. The Gupta kings, and those following them, have claimed that the gift of land was made merely to add to the king's personal piety, but the action served a much wider purpose. The brahmanas, particularly those settled with land in the remote areas of the kingdom, were the bearers of brahmanical ideals, which came in contact with the local customs and practices and helped generate a syncretic culture. This has always been the central thrust and a major feature of Indian culture. Besides, these brahmanas became the king's representatives in areas where the direct presence of the administrative machinery was not possible, and the state's powers were validated through them. Thus the relationship between the king and the brahmanas was founded on mutual dependence and the Gupta rulers institutionalized this system. There is thus little doubt that the Gupta rulers were patrons of brahmanism, even though they were not hostile to the Buddhists.

The political ideology of the brahmanas: Why did the Guptas and most later dynasties favour the brahmanas? Brahmanism always proclaimed monarchy as the only valid form of political organization. This is borne out by the celebration of monarchy in

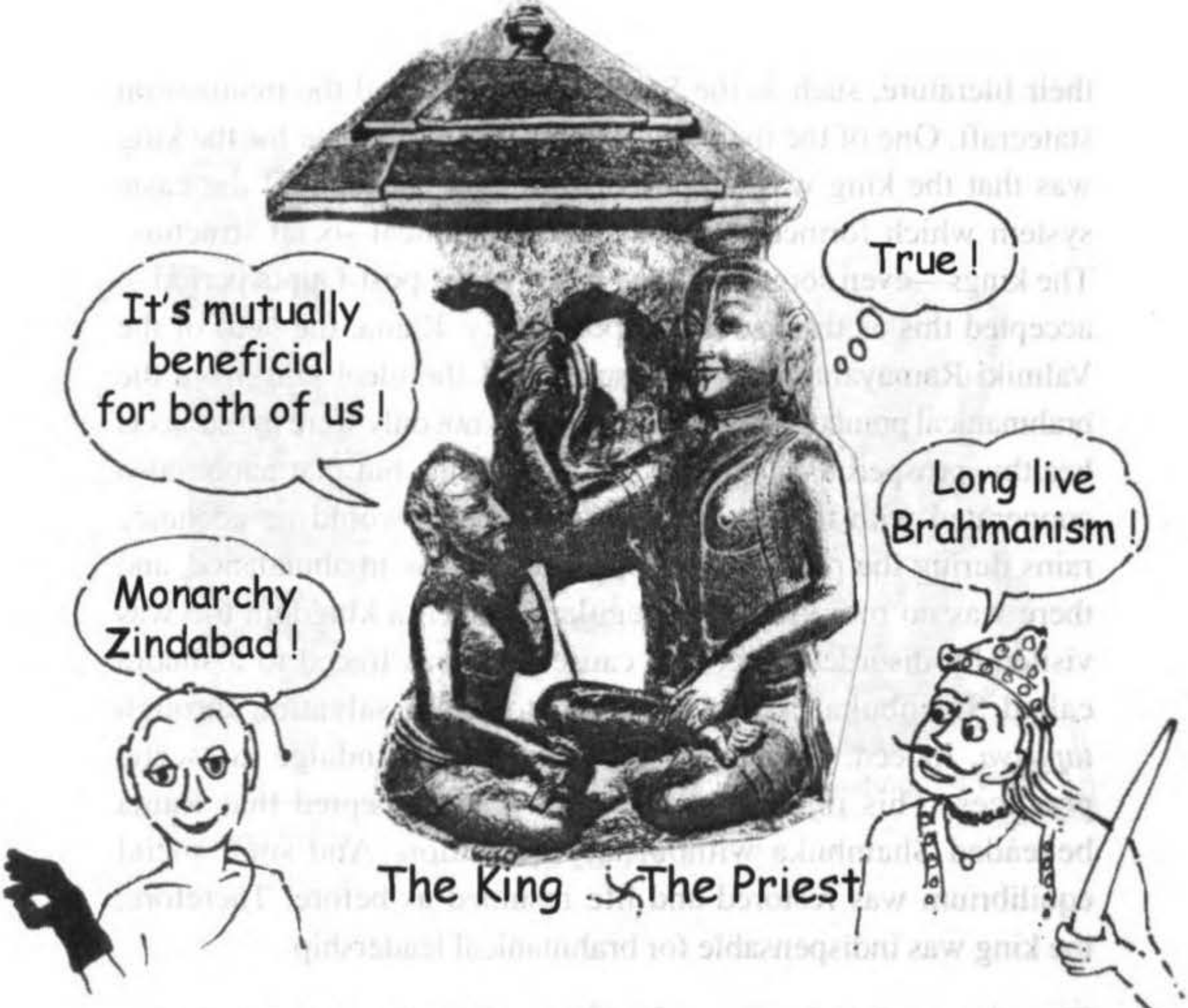

Gadura Pillar
← Gupta Art →
Vishnu riding the Gadura


I am Vishnu's Varaha avatar!
And a symbol of the Gupta Empire's might !

their literature, such as the Smritis, the epics and the treatises on statecraft. One of the main reasons for this preference for the king was that the king was supposed to protect and uphold the caste system which formed the basis of brahmanical social structure. The kings—even some Buddhist rulers of the post-Gupta period—accepted this as their social responsibility. Rama, the hero of the Valmiki Ramayana, may be described as the ideal king from the brahmanical point of view. We are told that not only were the subjects healthy, prosperous and happy under his rule, but that nature also cooperated with this exemplary ruler. There would be adequate rains during the monsoons, crops would grow in abundance, and there was no room for any irregularity. Such a kingdom too was visited by disorder once. The cause of it was traced to a shudra called Shambuka, who was trying to attain salvation through *tapasya*. Indeed, a shudra was not entitled to indulge in ascetic practices. This injunction was so widely accepted that Rama beheaded Shambuka without any hesitation. And soon social equilibrium was restored and life resumed as before. Therefore, the king was indispensable for brahmanical leadership.

The other model of governance that was found in ancient India has often been euphemistically described as 'democratic republic' by the nationalist historians, but it was no more than a kind of tribal oligarchy. Gautama Buddha belonged to one such 'republican' state. There was no reason for such a state to owe allegiance to Brahmanism. Moreover, since Buddhism began by rejecting inherited caste identities, Buddhist rulers had no obligation to preserve the brahmanical social order. Evidently the brahmanas and the king needed each other.

In reality, however, the relationship was more complex. It must be remembered that the Maurya and the Kushana rulers, under whose patronage Buddhism initially prospered, were monarchs themselves. Also, long-distance trade, which played a major role in the origin and diffusion of Buddhism, required a strong and well-protected kingdom to ensure the security of the trade route. It is



possible to argue that that neither the Mauryas nor the Kushanas received brahmanical endorsement as rulers because the former belonged to a low caste and the latter as outsiders, to no caste at all. This argument is weak: if even the Shakas and the Hunas could secure brahmanical support by paying obeisance to the brahmanical deities, why could the Kushanas not do the same if they so wished? Just as we do not know the caste identity of the Mauryas, so also we are in the dark about the caste of the Guptas. Thus there is no obvious explanation as to why the Guptas offered patronage to and received legitimation from the brahmanas. Besides, there is no convincing answer to the question, 'Who is a kshatriya?' From the early medieval period, we observe that whoever is the king is a kshatriya, and it is the brahmana priest who confers on him the necessary status by preparing an acceptable genealogy in return for a suitable remuneration. There is, therefore, no easy explanation

for the mutual dependence between the king and the brahmana. But the fact remains that the ruling dynasties of early India have mostly enjoyed brahmanical cooperation, at least since the Gupta period.

Construction of Puranic religion: Fortified with state patronage, the brahmanas now embarked on writing a new genre of texts called the Puranas. The transformation of the brahmanical religion and society from the Gupta period had its scriptural basis in the Smritis and the Puranas. The rules and regulations of human society are the subject matter of the Smritis; the pursuits of the gods and goddesses occupy the Puranas. The Puranas, along with the Smritis, were composed with a view to re-establish caste-based brahmanical social order under the aegis of a favourable state power. The brahmanas had hardly had an opportunity to get their act together following the disjunction caused by the rapid growth of Buddhism and Jainism after the Vedic period. A few centuries had elapsed in the meantime, during which Buddhism made astonishing progress, secured the support of the rich and powerful sections of society, and the Maurya and the Kushana rulers managed to exert their political authority over not only the whole of northern India but even some parts of central Asia and the Deccan. Neither the foundation nor the area association of the Vedic society could match the changed circumstances any longer. The brahmanas realized that there was no chance of staying in the race for social dominance with the Buddhists unless they could include the local people with their distinctive customs, beliefs and rituals, into the brahmanical society. In other words, all efforts were now directed at broadening the social base of brahmanical influence.

The following points should be remembered in connection with the writing of the Puranas:

- The brahmanas wrote the Puranas to widen their area of influence and reach the maximum number of people to enlist their support for the brahmanical society.



• In the process, the brahmanas moulded and internalized many local rituals and beliefs according to their needs and included these in the texts of the Puranas while retaining a blanket control over the evolving syncretic religion.

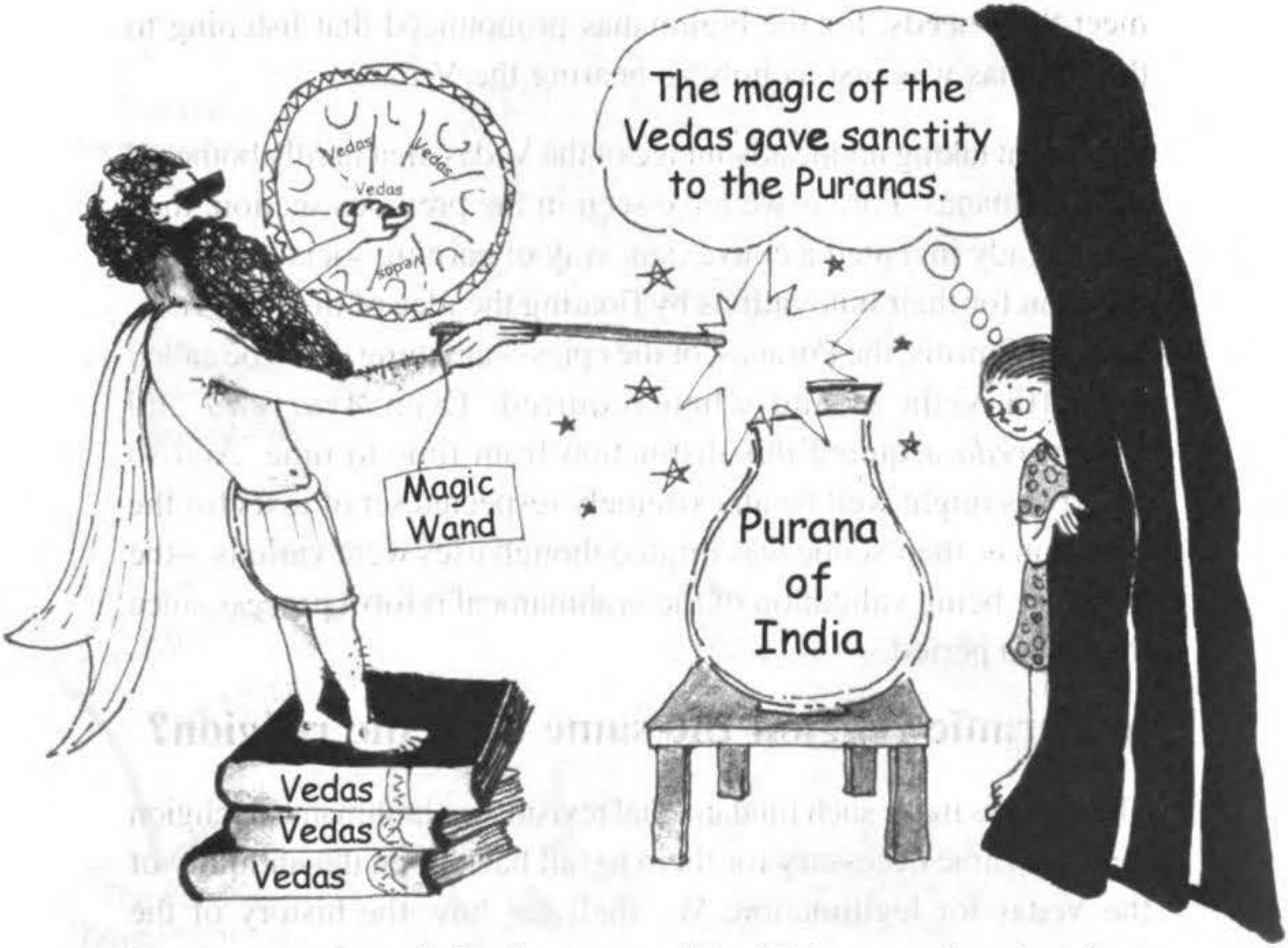
• For this, it was necessary to provide partial recognition to the local religions because this was considered to be the most effective way of drawing local people to a new faith controlled by the brahmanas.

• As a result, the brahmanas included in the Puranas some beliefs and practices which had little connection with the Vedic religion.

• But whatever the brahmanas put in the Puranas, including the new beliefs and practices, were in the name of the Vedas, using them as a magic wand and a shield.

• The other factor that helped the brahmanas to retain their socio-religious dominance in spite of such radical transformation of the Vedic religion was their monopoly over Sanskrit. The Puranas were written in Sanskrit, and their exclusive claim over the language provided the brahmanas with the instrument to maintain control over the entire process.

Uses of the Vedas: The Vedas are the oldest and the most respected scriptures of the brahmanas. Hence all innovations in the



Puranas were made in the name of the Vedas, arguing that these were sanctioned by the Vedas, therefore, acceptable. Some of the practices incorporated in the Puranas had no connection with the Vedas, but that did not deter the brahmanas. They assumed rightly that the magic touch of the Vedas would legitimize these new elements and thus help to maintain continuity with the older tradition, which is why they consistently claimed that the Puranas

were either shorter version or confirming elaboration of the Vedas. It was projected that with the advent of the Kaliyuga, people would be stupid and short-lived; they would no longer be able to read and comprehend the meaning of the Vedas. Hence, at every *manvantar* (the lifespan of a Manu), Vedavyasa writes the Purana-Samhitas, based on the essence of the Vedas, so that they are adapted to the times and comprehensible to all classes of men and even women. The shudras and women were forbidden from hearing the Vedas, but not the Puranas. Indeed the Puranas were ostensibly written to meet their needs, for the brahmanas pronounced that listening to the Puranas was just as holy as hearing the Vedas.

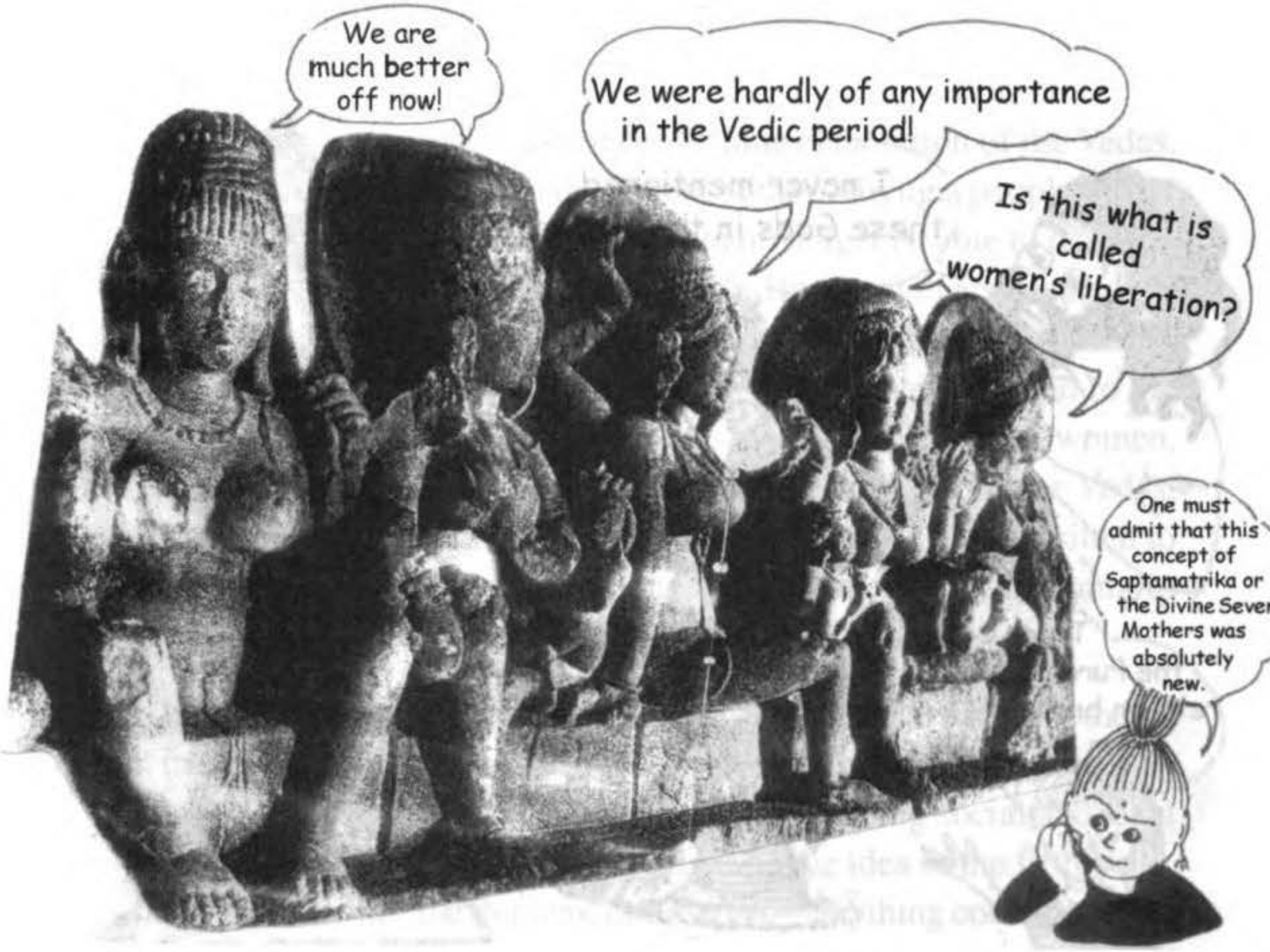
If it meant taking undue advantage of the Vedas, that hardly bothered the brahmanas. For, as we have seen in the previous section, they had already invented a convenient way of earning social and legal sanction for their innovations by floating the idea of the fifth Veda. Be it the Smritis, the Puranas, or the epics—anything could be called the fifth Veda as and when required. Even *Ayurveda* and *Dhanurveda* acquired this distinction from time to time. And so the Vedas might well be an extremely respected set of texts for the brahmanas, their scope was limited though uses were various—the main use being validation of the brahmanical reform process since the Gupta period.

Is Puranic religion the same as Vedic religion?

The Puranas made such fundamental revisions to brahmanical religion that it became necessary for them to fall back upon the antiquity of the Vedas for legitimation. We shall see how the history of the evolution of brahmanical religion, as contained in the Puranas, bears little intrinsic relation with the Vedic religion. With the expansion of brahmanical society, brahmanical religion was also undergoing radical transformation. Some of these were sanctioned and documented by the Puranas, while the rest were brought about through Puranic initiative. Under the changed circumstances it would not have been possible to retain the Vedic connection unless


I never mentioned
these Gods in the Vedas!
True,
the Puranic
religion brought
them in!


These new goddesses have been
contributed by the Puranas
The Puranas
have imagined
them as
Durga, Kali etc.



the Puranas resolved to invoke the Vedas at the slighest instance, often without justification. Let us take a look at what these changes were.

• First, the gods, whose exploits are described in the Puranas, are not essentially Vedic deities. In the Puranas, the major gods are Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, who are responsible for creation, preservation and destruction and are hailed as the three high gods (*trimurti*) of the new pantheon. Among the three, only Vishnu finds a mention in the Vedas, where he is a companion of Indra and is no more than a minor deity. Also, several pan-Indian deities such as Ganesha find no mention in the Vedas.

• The Puranas constructed another class of divinities who were located in the margins of the patriarchal Vedic pantheon. These are the goddesses. There are references to a few divine characters conceived in the feminine gender such as Usha and Prithvi in the Vedic texts, but they faded into insignificance when compared to

Jai Santoshi Ma

As the brahmanical society would come into contact with local cultures and imbibe new elements from them, the number of goddesses would also correspondingly increase. Besides, a society changes with time. If new situations demand new goddesses, then the option of getting them was also left open. Santoshi Ma, who has fast transformed herself from being the heroine of a film to an influential deity, is the most recent example of this process. It seems that her popularity with the affluent sections of society has inspired people to write a Purana in Sanskrit glorifying her.





the male deities. Puranic religion established the goddesses in their own right as the source of energy and power of the universe. The Vedas do not even mention Durga, Radha, Lakshmi or Kali, but it is impossible to envisage Puranic religion without them. The prime reason behind the revival of the goddesses is probably that they were locally worshipped under different names and forms before the Vedic age as well as during and after it. When brahmanical society started to incorporate elements from local cultures and re-order them to suit their own ends, the goddesses too came to acquire their rightful places.

• In the section entitled, 'In Search of the Vedic Age', we have read about the three principal Vedic deities—Agni, Indra and Soma—whose position declined in the later period. Mitra and Varuna were the other important Vedic gods; the responsibility of maintaining order in the universe once rested with them. In the Puranas, they have not even been given a place in the divine court. Indra was retained, and he was even declared as the king of gods, but all his responsibilities and attendant status were handed over to Vishnu.

• Another Puranic innovation was the conceptualization of gods and goddesses in anthropomorphic forms and their transformation into tangible icons. They were human likenesses, though not entirely realistic—no human being has ten arms or four heads. But neither were they abstract concepts. Rather, they were palpable, visible objects made from stone, wood or metal. The Vedic gods too have been occasionally imagined to have forms, even though they were natural forces, usually conceived as formless mass of energy. However, they have never been represented as iconic form.



• Icons are holy and worthy of worship. They cannot be placed anywhere and everywhere, particularly not in undistinguished places of everyday use. Consecration of an icon requires a fitting environment, be it a small but separate room for worship inside the house, or a magnificent temple built by a royal patron. Temples were brought into existence by the necessities of idol-worship. It is true that idols of deities, particularly terracota idols for popular use, did exist before the composition of the Puranas, but there is no evidence of temples, as we know them today, before the Gupta period.

• As the new deities began to be worshipped in their iconic forms, the ways of worship changed as well. Dressing up of the idols, decorating them with garlands and sandalwood paste and offering them food and drink became the main rituals of everyday worship. The rigidity of Vedic rituals disappeared in Puranic worship and the chanting of Vedic mantras nearly went out of practice.



Jagannatha-Balarama-Subhadra

Let me give an example to show the extent of interdependence between the brahmanical society and local cultures in the Puranic milieu. Everyone must be familiar with the Jagannatha temple in Puri, Orissa. Three wooden idols of Jagannatha, Balarama and Subhadra are worshipped together in this temple. Those who have seen these idols or their pictorial representations are aware that they are incomplete as human likenesses; they do not have limbs and the heads and the torsos are not fully formed. Most of the Puranic gods and goddesses are embodiments of brahmanical ideals of beauty and, with the

• The Puranas contained instructions for the observances of a number of new rituals— such as going on pilgrimage and fulfilling vows—which helped extend the influence of brahmanical society. By linking different parts of India in a chain of holy sites, pilgrimages tried to forge the idea of a pan-Indian cultural unity. Puranic sanction made it easier for the original observers of vows (members of non-brahmanical society, especially women) to be included within the brahmanical society. Even in caste-based society, supposedly everyone has equal right to these two practices, and the taboo of pollution by touch does not operate on a pilgrimage.

exception of a few, all of them are ever-youthful. A jarring exception, therefore, calls for an explanation. As if in acknowledgement of this obligation, the Utkala Khanda of the *Skanda Purana* informs us that Jagannatha was originally the deity of the tribal Shavaras, and goes on to narrate the complex story of how he was taken over by the brahmanas. It is clear that in this case the brahmanas did not disown the original form of the idol—perhaps because it was too well-known. But the story that traditional folklore tells deserves closer attention. According to the folk version, the king requested none other than the artisan-god, Visvakarma, to sculpt the idol of Jagannatha. Realizing the importance of the project, Visvakarma agreed but on condition that no one can ask to see the incomplete work during the three days that will take him to finish the work. The king promised but failed to contain his own curiosity. On the second day, he peeped through the door of the workshop. Angered by this breach of promise, Visvakarma left immediately, leaving the idols in their incomplete state. And that is the form in which the idols are worshipped to this day. In the eyes of the devotee, however, they must be extremely beautiful; the external appearance of the idols cannot stifle the worshipper's devotion. Evidently the brahmanas invented stories to explain the strange image of the tribal deities they had to accept in an unaltered form.

• Another fundamental change occurred in the relationship between the worshipper and the worshipped. In Vedic religion, the relationship between the deity and the worshipper was largely mechanical. The Vedic texts promise that the worshipper will obtain desired results if he follows the rules and performs the rituals in the prescribed way. In Puranic religion, on the other hand, the relationship is founded on personal devotion. In other words, the relationship between the devotee and the object of devotion is based on love. This love is the true offering of the worshipper for a god or a goddess selected according to one's liking or in accordance



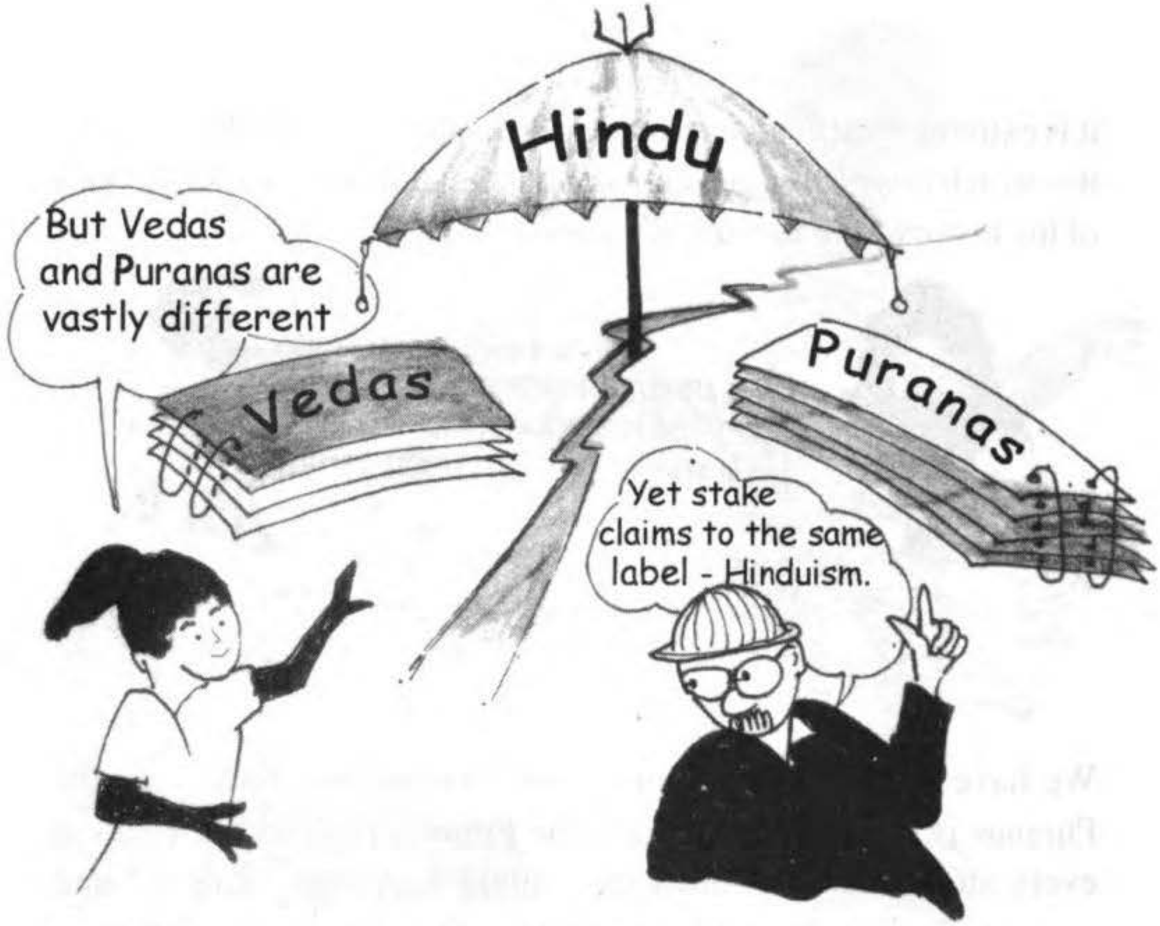
with the tradition of the family. This is why the Puranic god is not merely to be worshipped, but to be cherished and desired. In Puranic religion, ritual worship is but a perfunctory activity if it is devoid of earnestness of devotion. Paying daily obeisance to the deity by taking personal care of the idol is bound to forge a close relationship between the deity and the worshipper. This perhaps is the reason why the most popular deity in the Puranic pantheon is Krishna as a child.

We must now face the uncomfortable question—is Puranic religion an expanded form of Vedic religion? Are we discussing here the evolution of a single religion, or are these two mutually exclusive religious systems, which have come together through a series of coincidences? The historian cannot evade this question, although

it is extremely difficult to provide a clear and indisputable answer to it—which is why this question is often left unuttered in discussions of the history of brahmanical religion.



We have seen that the connection between the Vedas and the Puranas is far from accidental. The Puranas refer to the Vedas at every step. However much they might have had changed later, some of the Puranic gods can be traced from the Vedas. The most notable among them is Vishnu. His figure was in the process of being merged with Krishna-Vasudeva towards the end of the Vedic period. In the Mahabharata, Krishna ceased to be a mere tribal leader and became an incarnation of Vishnu. Just as Rama who was a valiant warrior or at most an ideal king in the core story of the Ramayana, came to be recognized as an incarnation of Vishnu towards the end of the epic. In fact, some scholars observe the origins of the theory of incarnations of Vishnu in Brahma's Varaha (boar) and Kurma (tortoise) *avataras* in the later Vedic period. Besides, in weddings, funerals and other life-cycle rituals of the higher caste families of brahmanical society, Vedic hymns are chanted to this day. In other words, in tracing the path from the Vedas to the Puranas, one may face several hurdles but is sure to find a few pointers indicating a discernible sequence. It is as early as the epics (that is, the first three-four centuries after the Christian era, when the epics came to acquire their present form) that a few signs of Puranic religion can be marked. That is only normal. No religious system can be initiated or fundamentally altered without some preparation. Most important,



the brahmanas were (and continue to be) the custodians of both the Vedic and the Puranic religions. The scriptures of both were written in Sanskrit (although there is a good deal of difference between Vedic Sanskrit and the post-Paninian form of the language), over which the brahmanas enjoyed total monopoly till the mid-nineteenth century. Sanskrit and the brahmanas are the primary links between the Vedas and the Puranas. That is why it is best to call them brahmanical religions, although the brahmanas never belonged to a homogeneous community, nor was there ever a complete unanimity of customs and creeds among them. However, despite these internal differences, they subscribed to the *varnashrama* principle of social classification and the infallibility of the Vedas. Because of this agreement, it may not be unreasonable to use the term brahmanical religion to describe both the Vedic and the Puranic religions.

Are we then referring to a single religious system? But how can we say that after delineating fundamental differences between the two? In fact, we are discussing here two religious systems which,

in spite of multiple connections with each other, are vastly different, and yet have claims to the same label. The label is Hinduism. We have not used this term so far since it was not prevalent even in the Puranic period. A religious system which is elastic enough to accommodate two distinct, even occasionally self-contradictory sets of beliefs and practices within a single frame, and can bring about an apparent synthesis that proves acceptable to the majority, cannot be contained within a narrow specific definition. Even without providing a definition, therefore, we may outline a few characteristic features of Hinduism to explain some essential aspects of its evolution.

Characteristics of Hinduism

There are a few unique features to Hinduism. They are not unique on qualitative grounds, but because no other organized institutional religion of the world possesses these characteristics. In brief, these features are as follows:

- First, Hinduism—and this includes both Vedic and Puranic religions—does not have a founder. An equivalent of Gautama Buddha, Jesus Christ or Hazrat Mohammad, who fundamentally influenced the course of human history by preaching new religious doctrines, and whose advent mark the beginning of the history of the religion they preached, can not be found in Hinduism. The implication of this lacuna can be easily perceived—Hinduism has no historical starting point. This means that one can date Hinduism according to one's own convenience. For instance, when the female figurines of the Indus Valley Civilization were discovered, or the image of 'Pashupati Shiva' was sighted on a Harappan seal (the figure of a man wearing a headgear and supposedly seated in a yogic posture, surrounded by some wild animals), the history of Hinduism was immediately pushed back by a couple of thousand years.

- The second characteristic follows from the first. The absence of



a historical founder means that Hinduism does not have a central religious text or a canon, regarded as infallible by all its followers, who consider it their religious duty to lead their lives according to its directives. That is, there is no Bible or Quran in Hinduism. But no institutional religion can be effective without the certainty of a canon. And so Hinduism too had to eventually indicate its infallible book of instruction which happened to be the four Vedas. Ironically, when the Vedas were accepted as the definitive book for the Hindus—for instance, in the Puranas—the *yajna*-centric Vedic religion had ceased to be practiced. As a result, the Vedas had lost their functional importance. But even when Vedic religion was nearly defunct, study of the Vedas was still common among the brahmanas; they considered it their sacred duty to preserve the Vedic literature in its pristine state. Thus, from the point of view of

the Vedic brahmanas, this revival of the Vedas was hardly unjustified. The authors of the Puranas claimed their works to be confirming elaborations of the Vedic tenets. The status of the Vedas as canon was thus established beyond question.

• The third feature of Hinduism is that it is not administered by an organized hierarchy of authority. All the institutional religions of the world are run by a centralized organization with formal rules for devolution of authority to the local units. From the beginning, the Sangha has been an indispensable part of Buddhism. All Muslims of the world treat Mecca as their ultimate place of pilgrimage. Whatever their personal opinions, all Roman Catholics regard the Pope's word as final. But in Hinduism there is no such clear stratification of authority. All Hindu temples are self-contained and none of them is a part of a larger order. This is why the circle of influence of a Hindu temple is usually limited to the locality or the region around it. No Hindu temple can claim to have a nation-wide acceptance.

• What is true for the temples also holds true for the *mathas* (monastic institutions). The Hindu sannyasis instead of being organized into a single community are divided into many sects with differing practices and customs. The only similarity between a Vedantic sannyasi who follows the path of knowledge and an Aghori tantric who performs dreadful and socially prohibited rites in the cremation ground, is perhaps that both have renounced domestic life. The disparity between the beliefs, practices, rituals and lifestyles of the different groups of sannyasis is the main reason why a monastic culture, in the proper sense of the term, never developed in Hinduism.

• Hinduism is the only religion which is at the same time a system of social stratification. Every Hindu is part of a pre-ordained caste, and he inherits this social position at birth. Even those who do not actually belong to the caste system but are indispensable for the Hindu society, such as the Chandalas, are incorporated into the

Is the Gita the sacred text of the Hindus?

Another characteristic of Hindu religious texts must be mentioned here. We have already noticed that the Vedas are the most sacred texts of the Hinus only theoretically—having little relevance to the practical, or even religious, life of the Hindus per se. Does this then mean that the Hindus have no sacred text with which (or with the substance of which) they are somewhat familiar, or which occasionally inspires them? Indeed, the Hindus have sacred texts, several of them, but not a single, definitive one. The sects belonging to the larger Hindu family have their own texts which their members revere as the most sacred, such as the *Bhagvatapurana* for the Vaishnavas or the *Devi-Mahatmya* for the Shaktas. These are again subject to change in keeping with changing locality or sub-sects. For instance, the *Chaitanya Charitamrita* is the most significant text for the Bengal Vaishnavas. This is natural, given the flexible structure of Hinduism. But when one speaks of a universally acceptable text, the name that immediately crops up is the *Shrimad Bhagavadgita*. It contains the long address of Krishna to Arjuna on the eve of the battle of Kurukshetra when Arjuna's indecision regarding the nature of his duty rendered him incapable of wielding weapons against his own kinsmen. Probably composed in the first or second century AD, the Gita contains brief discussions on the pragmatic aspects of the Hindu philosophies expounded so far. But the two most notable contributions of the Gita in the realm of thought are:

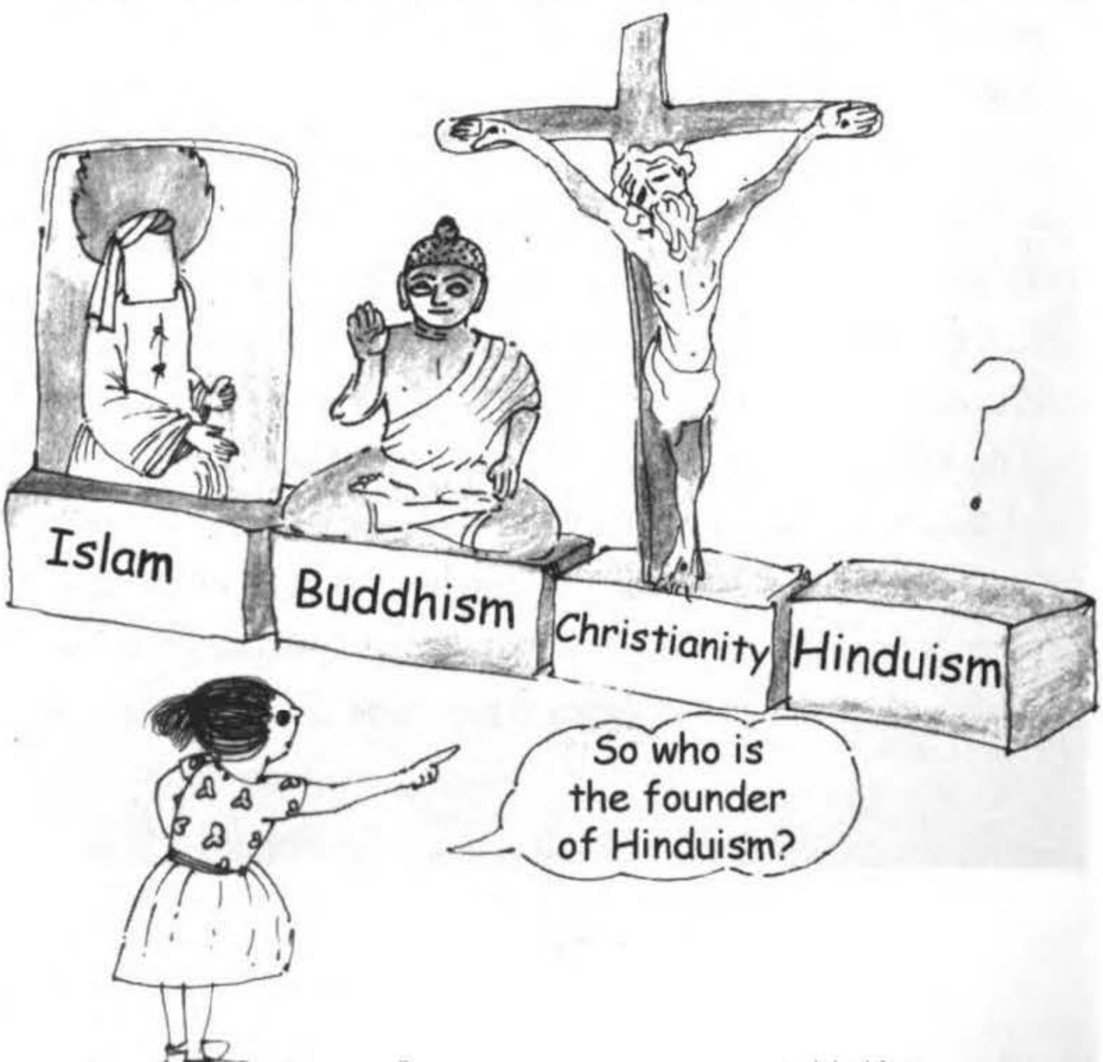
• among the paths to salvation such as knowledge, action, and devotion—devotion is the most appropriate for the majority;

• and it is desirable to pursue one's duty being free from attachments and without expecting results, since events are pre-determined and inevitable and the individual is no more than a mere agent in this cosmic scheme of things.

This simple and somewhat self-contradictory philosophy may seem to undermine the importance of individual effort, but the book has made a huge impact on the Indian mind through the ages. From the Advaita philosopher Sankaracharya to the Bhakti poet Jnaneshwara to the leader of the Indian national movement Mahatma Gandhi, a number of thinkers have written commentaries of the text based on their own realizations and inclinations. Both the revolutionaries and the non-violent *satyagrahis* were equally inspired to lay down their lives by the Gita's ideal of dispassionate action. That is why the Gita occupies a unique position among the religious texts of the Hindus. Although it is the spoken word of Krishna, there is no difference of opinion among the Hindus about the acceptability of the Gita irrespective of their sectarian affiliation. And yet Krishna, the promulgator of the Gita, is not the object of devotion of the Hindus. It is Krishna, the little boy who loves to steal butter, who receives their worship. This too is one of the features of Hinduism that defies explanation.

system as the 'fifth varna'. It implies that one can be a Hindu by birth alone and that there is no scriptural sanction or procedure for conversion to Hinduism. A Hindu can convert to Buddhism, Christianity, Islam or any other religion of his choice, but members of these religions cannot become Hindus if they so wish, at least not according to the rules. Even if a follower of another religion embraces Hinduism, he cannot acquire a caste identity. This is perhaps the reason why Hinduism does not permit conversion. Some reformist neo-Hindu sects, such as the Arya Samaj had attempted to bring the converted Hindus back to its fold through a process of purification during the nineteenth century. But such attempts were not very successful. Besides, this would merely be a renewal of one's Hindu identity and not a proper conversion.

The diversity of the medieval Bhakti cults sufficiently demonstrates how loose the organizational structure of Hinduism has been. All religious leaders were free to preach their doctrines—as did Sankaradeva and Shri Chaitanya; all mystic seekers of truth and



god could express the fruits of their self-realization without constraint—as did Meerabai, Kabir, Tulsidas, Ravidas and others. Hinduism has always allowed space for such differences. It is not as if this freedom was never challenged; the votaries of brahmanical conservatism, their patron state, patriarchy—all have at different times and in different ways tried to suppress this apparently radical but basically syncretic plural voice. But these attempts ultimately failed, perhaps for want of an overseeing centralized administrative machinery of Hinduism. Not only that, these varied doctrines eventually came to be accepted as valid constituents of Hinduism; the brahmanas themselves used them when they felt the need for it.

Who is a Hindu?

It is time now to confront the question—who, then, is a Hindu? Till the nineteenth century, a Hindu would be a person whom brahmanical society would accept as one. Today, anyone who declares himself a Hindu when the official census is conducted is considered to be a Hindu. It goes without saying that neither of these is a reliable or satisfactory method of assessing the identity of a Hindu. But then, there was never a unanimously accepted yardstick among the brahmanas to determine who is a Hindu, and why he is so. The differences kept increasing as the local characteristics of brahmanical religion and society started becoming more pronounced.

From the brahmanical perspective, therefore, belief in the infallibility of the Vedas and acceptance of the caste system as the only valid form of social classification are regarded as the minimum requirements of a Hindu. Most Hindus today are not acquainted with the contents of the Vedas, nor do the texts have any role in their everyday lives; the question of their fallibility or infallibility is not expected to bother them too much. Outside the limits of urban India, the caste system still holds sway over Hindu society, but as a marker of one's social identity rather than one's religion.



That census procedures are vulnerable to slips and errors is amply attested by the confusion created by the recent census about the rise in the growth rate of Muslims in India.

If a Hindu proclaims himself to be a non-Hindu, there is no way of proving that he is a Hindu. Unlike in Christianity and Islam, there is no baptism ceremony or other initiation rituals for all children in Hinduism, nor are such rituals, when applicable for a Hindu child, officially documented. As a result, an individual can easily disclaim his Hindu identity, though he may not be able to prove his affiliation to another institutional religion; just as it is difficult to disprove that a person is a Hindu if he claims to be one. White Americans belonging to the Harekrishna movement, clad in traditional Indian dress and accessories, are seen happily singing the praise of Krishna. There is no way to prevent them from calling themselves Hindus if they so wish. (There is no need to do so either, but that is a different matter.) In other words, there are several gaps in one's Hindu

identity. And this is only to be expected, since not only is Hinduism a religion without a historical beginning such as the birth of a prophet or an unanimously accepted guardian such as the church, but there is also a never-ending debate about the origin and use of the term 'Hindu'.

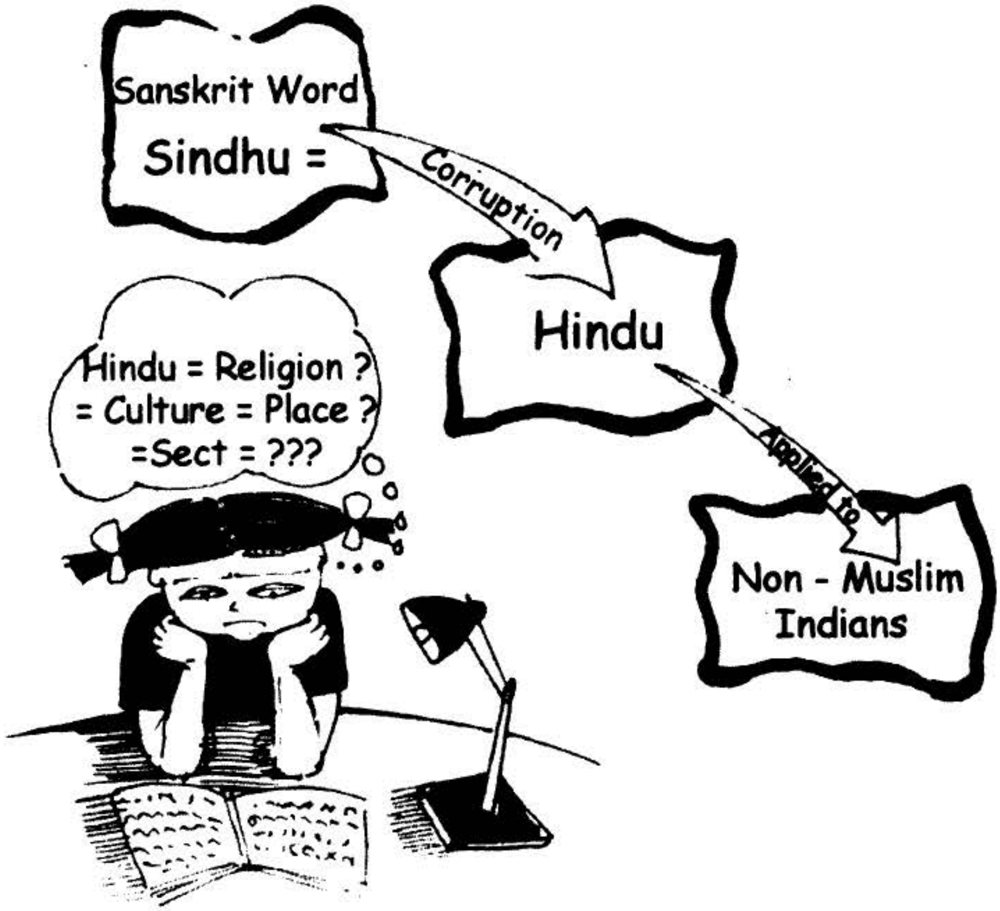
The origin of the term Hindu: Hindu is the Persian corruption of the Sanskrit Sindhu. The term has been used in *Avesta*, the holy book of the Zoroastrians, to denote the inhabitants of the Indus delta and its adjacent areas. From the eighth century, when the Muslims started settling down in the Indus valley, Persian writers have been using the term Hindu for the non-Muslim Indians. The famous traveller Al-Biruni too used the term in the same sense in his encyclopaedic account of India. These Persian scholars were aware of the existence of several schools of religious thought and practice among the Hindus. But when the Europeans began to use the term, they paid no attention to the diversity within the Hindu society. They even failed to notice that India, the name they gave to the geographical entity, derives from Indus, the western corruption of Sindhu—and means exactly what Hindu used to mean till then. The 'Hindus' they saw were different from the Muslims, Christians, Jews, Parsis and Jains of coastal India. They took it for granted that the Hindus were a separate community and followers of a particular religious faith. This fundamental change in the meaning of the term and the consequent birth of an inchoate idea called Hinduism, has been the cause of much misery for the Indians.

The question—what is Hinduism and who is a Hindu—is yet to reach a satisfactory resolution accepted by all. The British colonizers, from their first-hand experience of ruling India, and the curious scholars from their reading of religious texts written in Sanskrit and regional languages, discovered that an undifferentiated religion called Hinduism did not exist, then or ever. Rather, the term can be used to mean an aggregate of several religious customs and beliefs, some which came to acquire an unorganized yet institutional character through brahmanical mediation. They

decided that Hinduism is a single religious entity which is arranged in three stages. The first is Vedic-brahmanical which is pure and rich in philosophical ideas, the second is Smriti-Puranic which is encumbered by excessive ritualism and steeped in superstitions, and the third is born of primitive and illogical beliefs. Even the modern, English-educated, reformist neo-Hindu outfits internalized most of this interpretation and preferred the so-called purity of the Vedic-Upanishadic religion to the allegedly pedestrian and cumbrous Puranic religion. Thus a huge tree, with a single trunk but innumerable branches, called Hinduism came into existence. It was soon forgotten that this was a colonial construction and that in spite of the Puranic effort to synthesize the various strands, essentially self-contained religious systems such as Shaivism and Vaishnavism never described themselves as Hindu before the eighteenth century.

What came to be known as Hinduism from the colonial times is in reality a composite idea, assigning places to everything that ever came to be associated with this umbrella religion—from the pre-Vedic period to the present. As a result, in spite of its unwieldy structure, Hinduism came to possess certain unique characteristics. Two of the most important among these are the coexistence of the apparently unrelated, even self-contradictory customs and beliefs, and the drive to blend these into a unified whole. Since unifying ideals mitigate opposition, this attitude is praiseworthy. In other words, its organizational weakness is Hinduism's real source of strength.

Hindutva politics: Of late, a section of the Hindus have started claiming 'Hindutva' as the defining characteristic of their identity, which has become a phenomenon of great significance in contemporary India. The votaries of Hindutva want to build a united Hindu body which will be able to match the other Indian religions in organizational strength. On the basis of their numerical superiority, they would then demand the prerogatives of being the unchallenged religious majority in India and lay a claim on the



other advantages that this status might bring. Later, we will talk about the origin, aims and character of Hindutva. But it is important to mention here that the idea of Hindutva runs contrary to two major trends of the history of Hinduism. For one, the space that Hinduism allowed for the articulation of multiple voices is gradually shrinking behind the artificial homogeneity imagined by the supporters of Hindutva—and this goes against the basic character and potential for future development of Hinduism. For another, the Hindutva brigade is trying to assume the role of the religious guardian, the very absence of which in Hinduism had allowed the Hindus considerable religious freedom. The pursuits of these self-appointed champions of the Hindu cause will certainly curtail the freedom of the individual Hindus. In short, not only is Hinduism not synonymous with Hindutva, the latter is not even a natural culmination of the evolutionary trajectory of the former. In fact, Hindutva—even if it may not intentionally do so—is actually harming the cause of Hinduism.

Hindutva

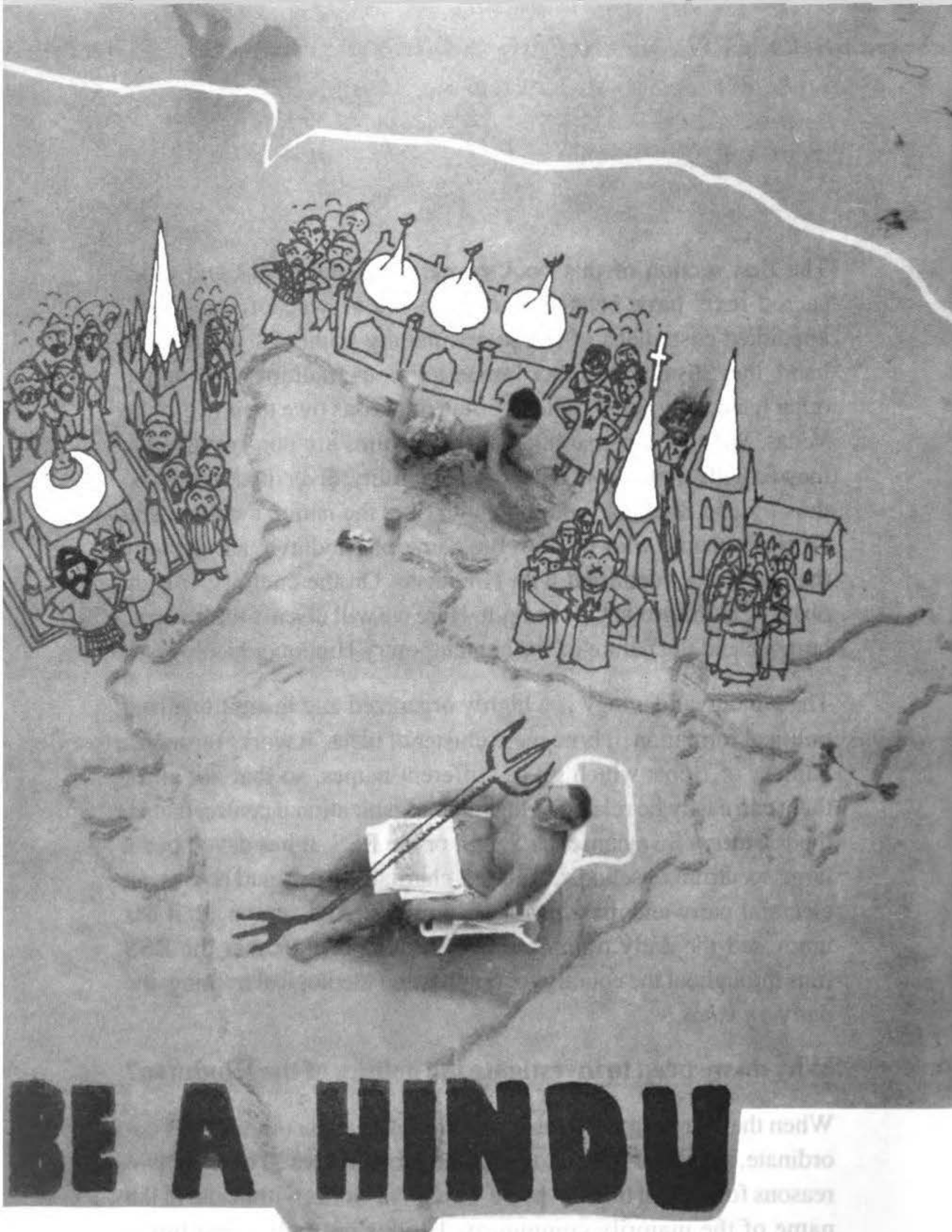


The first section of this book reveals how the Vedas and other sacred texts have been pressed into the service of some self-appointed custodians of Hindu community traditions. On the one hand, they dismiss all other Indian religious traditions and on the other hand, they assert that all Indian traditions owe their life to the Vedas. We also saw that most of their claims are non-sustainable, they actually try to crush our cultural plurality, diversity. Those who thus try and establish a stranglehold over the nation's culture and faith are people who work in the name of Hindutva; an ideology that cannot be identified with Hinduism. On the contrary, it is an obstacle to the growth of the faith. Here we will discuss the sources, purpose and the nature of the contemporary Hindutva ideology.

The Hindutva ideology is a highly organized and institutionalized political formation; it is no mere cluster of ideas. It works through a number of fronts which go by different names, so that not all of them can easily be related to the main organizational centre, that is, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh or the RSS. It has developed a large spectrum of schools, temples, charitable trusts and bodies, an electoral party and mass media institutions. And, above all, it has innovated the daily training schedules and centres that the RSS runs throughout the country for combat and ideological training: the daily *shakhas*.

Why do we need to investigate the politics of the Hindutva?

When there are organizations that other religious communities co-ordinate, why do we need to worry about Hindutva? There are two reasons for that. In the first place, Hindutva works within and in the name of the majority community. Hindus not only constitute a vast numerical majority in our country, they also have elites who are socially, politically and economically way ahead of the elites


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among other communities. Their politics, thus, possesses the ability to change the political-constitutional traditions of our country. When the Bharatiya Janata Party or the BJP—the electoral front of the RSS—was leading the coalition government at the Centre, not only did they talk of fundamental changes in the Constitution, they also redefined the meanings of democracy and secularism as majoritarianism—or, rule by a political formation that claims to represent the interests of the largest religious community. We should remember at this point that rule by fixed and permanent interest blocs is entirely antithetical to the real meaning of democracy.

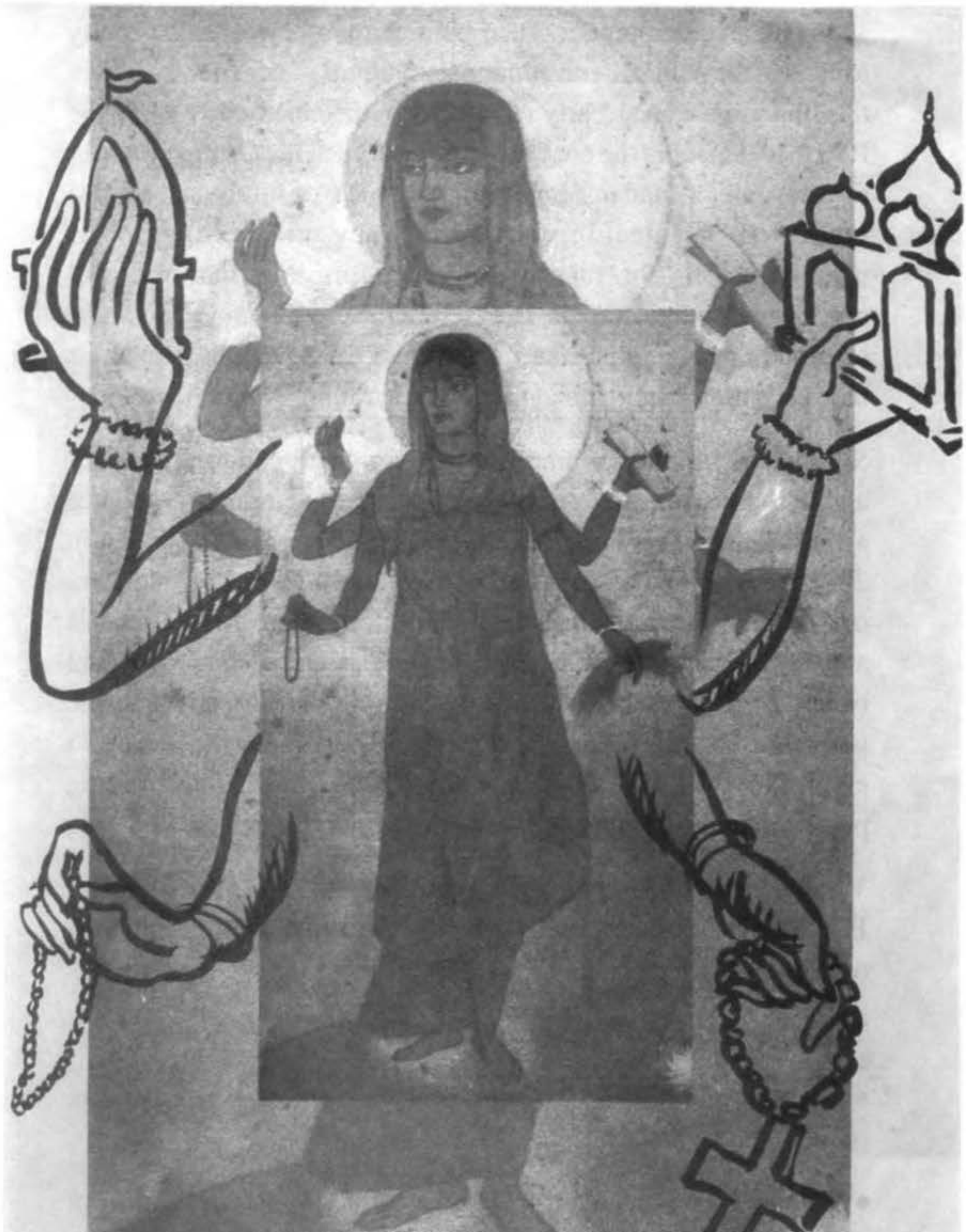
Second, the Hindutva politics started gaining ground from the mid-eighties through campaigns of vicious hatred and immense violence against Indian Christians and Muslims. The pogrom in Gujarat in 2002 were a very clear instance of that politics. In comparison, despite a lot of communal rhetoric and fundamentalist tendencies among segments of the minority communities, and despite occasional bouts of violent retaliation, there is nothing like parallel or comparable political organizations or cohesive institutions among them: they do not, for instance, have political parties of their own. Their striking power, therefore, is nowhere as serious or consequential.

What kinds of ideas do the multiple organizations of the Hindutva brigade try to communicate among different groups of Hindus?

There are two main strands in their message.

- India is the land of Hindus, and Hindu culture is the essential core of Indian civilization.

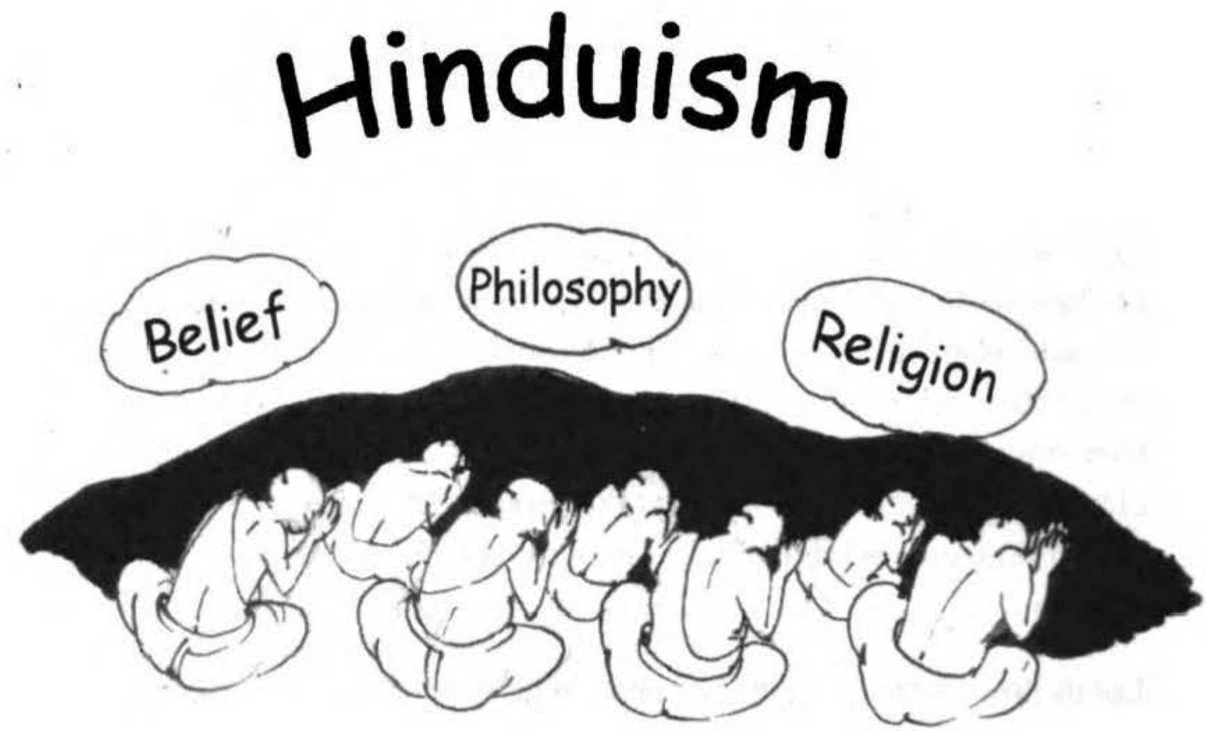
- Whatever lies outside the Hindu community is, therefore, not authentically Indian. Worse, it is actually anti-Indian. All other non-Hindu cultural and religious traditions are either extraneous or they are dangerous and alien.



The Hindutva brigade of multiple mass fronts proclaims that it will build a Hindu nation whose cultural essence will be untouched by other cultural presences. If people of other faiths and cultures are irrelevant to the nation, if they form no part of the nation's culture, then, by the same logic, they are not its rightful citizens with an equal claim to the nation or the state. In order to achieve such an exclusionist Hindu Rashtra or the Hindu nation state, the Hindutva brigade is necessarily and very deliberately committed to the production of violent antagonism towards other communities. Communal violence is no longer a product of accidental, unplanned clashes or of local tensions. It is the product of a highly calibrated and organized ideological movement which produces a new value system.

Let us now clarify certain categories which are conventionally used synonymously and which, therefore, lead to confusion.

Contemporary form of communal ideology and Hindu nationalism: Even though the two terms are, in fact, often used interchangeably, I think they should be distinguished from each other. In our popular usage, nationalism has long been identified with anti-colonial struggles and politics, and the RSS—born in 1925, under colonial rule—had never been a part of those movements. Moreover, a number of secular nationalists like Gandhi, who passionately believed that Muslims and Christians are an integral part of the nation which is pluralistic, nonetheless, were fervent Hindus in their personal belief. Gandhi used Hindu motifs and symbols to mobilize Hindu masses, and the concept of Ramrajya as the ideal nation state of the future is an example of that. Similarly, Muslim nationalists, too, would use a Muslim political concept like that of Khilafat in order to arouse the Muslim masses against colonial governance. The use of religious concepts in politics, however, did not come in the way of political unity and joint struggles, even if it had other problems. The unified Non-Cooperation and Khilafat movements of 1921 show that separate religious symbols do not necessarily lead to communalization, they


Hinduism
Belief
Philosophy
Religion


Hindutva
Violence !
Politics !
Intolerance !

can also advance unity. We can go further and show that even an assertion of Hindu superiority does not necessarily lead to strife or enmity. There were leading Hindu nationalists who believed in the superiority of Hinduism over all other religions. But not all of them would use that sense of superiority to advocate hostility or violence against men of other faith. Nor would they say that non-Hindus did not equally belong to this country. Swami Vivekananda went abroad with a project of preaching Hindu supremacy in religious thought systems. He desisted, however, from anti-Muslim or anti-Christian propaganda and nor did he strive to unify Hindus on the basis of hostility towards others. It is true enough that he tried to establish a kinship among all religions that were born in Asia like Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity but he excluded Islam from this conglomerate. The exclusion, nonetheless, did not assume the form of overt antagonism. Shri Aurobindo, too, would often use Hindu and Indian unity synonymously, without ever propagating hatred against other faiths. So that unity was not founded on enmity. Exclusion and positive hatred may share certain feelings but they still belong to very different realms. A sense of difference or mutual Otherness can be non-antagonistic. It is the violent and aggressive propagation of Otherness that is the essential hallmark of Hindutva.

Hinduism and Hindutva: Contemporary Hindutva ideologues strain hard to convince us that Hinduism and Hindutva are the same substance. We, however, have already seen how radically different they are from each other. Hinduism as a singular, cohesive, self-conscious and subcontinental religious formation may be something that emerged only in modern times. However, the beliefs, ritual practices and moral norms of Hindus often go back to very ancient sources, even though we know that these have always changed over time. Hindutva ideology, on the other hand, is an entirely modern development. It could not possibly have emerged before the development of concepts about the nation state. Leaders of this brigade are, in fact, not overmuch concerned with nor try to intervene in matters of Hindu faith and ritual. They lack a

preoccupation with custom, practice, dogma and texts, a preoccupation which is the sign of men of faith. They are not interested in philosophical or theological doctrines.

Their sole intervention in matters of faith is in a single direction. They have prized out a particular episode from the epic Ramayana—



the war between Ram and the demons—which they have forcibly welded with an imaginary reconstruction of an episode from medieval history—Babur's demolition of a temple that an ancient king had supposedly built to commemorate Ram's birthplace. The ensuing mixture of pseudo-myth and pseudo-history has never been a part of Hindu belief. In no version of the epic do we find a reference to such an act of demolition, not even in the version composed by Tulsidas in his *Ramcharitmanas*, which was actually written in the lifetime of Babur. No known version of the epic

links the battle with the demons with Hindu-Muslim wars. Nor was Ayodhya worshipped only or primarily as Ram's birthplace. In a Bengali pilgrimage manual called *Tirthamukur*, which was written in 1893 to instruct pilgrims about pilgrimage ritual, Ayodhya is commemorated as the place where the epic hero died, not as the place where he was born. Therefore, pilgrims were told to perform their ancestral rites at this place which was also described as Ramgaya. So even in modern times, faithful Hindus gave other meanings to the sacred site that had nothing much to do with Ramjanambhoomi and nothing at all to do with anti-Muslim sentiments.

If we do not equate Hindutva with Hinduism or with Hindu nationalism, what other term can we use to describe it?

I would coin a new term as a more accurate description : Hindu Nationism, since the proclaimed aim of these people is to replace the definition of India from a secular, multicultural nation state to a Hindu one : the establishment of Hindu Rashtra. This is a term that reflects the intentions and self image of the brigade. In order to attain such a nation, they rely on systematic aggression against people of other faith to drive home the message that as non-Hindus they have no secure place nor claim within this country.

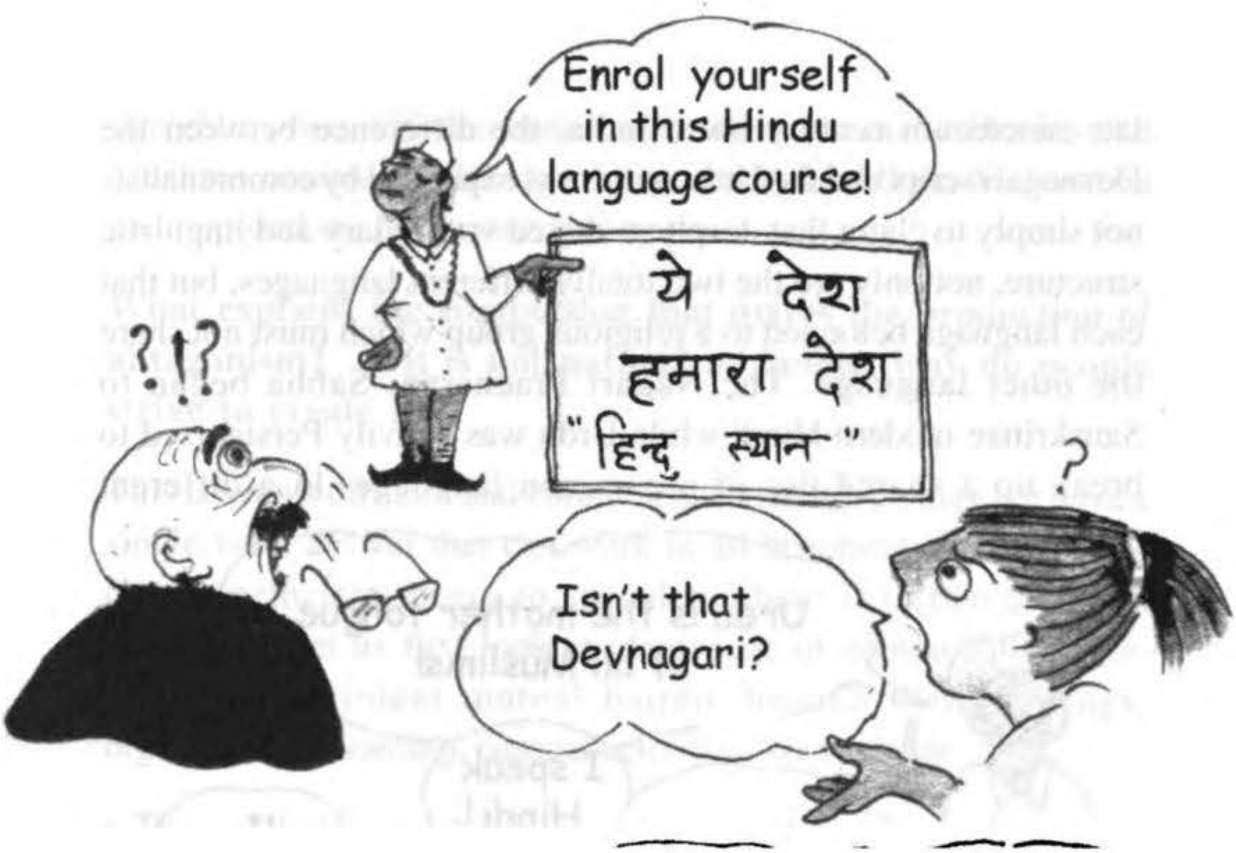
Hindutva and Hindu revivalism: Is this trend similar to the Hindu revivalism of the nineteenth century? There are important continuities but there are important differences as well. Nineteenth century Hindu revivalists tried to unite Hindus in order to compete with other communities. Swami Dayanand, in his last years during the 1880s, became deeply preoccupied with cow protection, and Hindu demographic growth. He also proselytized against Christianity and Islam, using extremely derogatory and harsh words against both. Islam, he said, was fundamentally intolerant and aggressive and Christianity was a primitive faith founded by an illiterate and poor man, it was filled with superstitions. At the same

time, for much of his lifetime, he tried to reform Hindu ritual and belief according to what appeared to him as the pristine sources of the faith. He was also deeply critical about much of traditional doctrines and mythology. So, even with the pronounced communal angle, his was a movement for internal transformation.

In the early phase of the nationalist movement, Sarala Debi Chowdhurani used a Hindu religious vocabulary to build up strength and unity. This was, however, an attempt at building self-confidence and not at violence against others. Hindu Nationism uses Hindu images and themes for a radically different purpose: to intimidate non-Hindus, to teach them that they are not equal citizens in their country. Overlaps do occur among Hinduism, nationalism, revivalism and nationism, but categorical distinctions, nonetheless, should be kept in mind.

Religious identity, community identity and communalism

People simultaneously bear multiple identities: gender, linguistic, regional, class, caste, national and religious. At times, one of these gets forcefully forefronted and others are temporarily overshadowed. The importance of that particular identity, too, may then subside, giving way to others, as the historical conjuncture changes and new processes develop. Religious identity has always been an extremely crucial aspect of individual and collective selfhood for people in our country since all religions are both a matter of personal faith and social-collective practice and solidarity, an institutionalized or public and an intimate, private dimension coexisting together. In the expressions of collective, organized religious behaviour, there are necessarily marked differences between one religion and another. When we are self-conscious about these divergences in community practices and worship, we have developed community consciousness which need not be premised on the sense of antagonistic difference. On the contrary, an awareness of difference may equally stimulate curiosity and wonder about cultural plurality.



It is only when this notion of mutual difference is transformed into a sense of mutual incompatibility, of inevitable hostility, that we have the growth of communalized consciousness. Communalists claim that religious identity is the only one that matters and that it denotes hatred of all other religious identities. We then start condemning others for being different, diversity becomes a threat to the self. We acquire a notion that all that is not us is our enemy, we cannot coexist on equal terms of mutual respect but we need the extinction of the other to survive, that our welfare demands the destruction of the other. We then also begin to think that it is this religious difference that is the most important and dangerous division that faces us, that this enmity is necessary, eternal and permanent.

Such communal consciousness matures further when it moves beyond religious difference or when it encompasses other aspects of life within its orbit. A stage comes when people of two religions feel that they share nothing at all with one another, they are not merely two communities, but two separate races whose blood, culture and history have and must remain separate and opposed. In

late nineteenth century north India, the difference between the Devnagari script and the Urdu script was expanded by communalists not simply to claim that despite a shared vocabulary and linguistic structure, not only are the two totally different languages, but that each language belonged to a religious group which must not share the other language. The Nagari Pracharani Sabha began to Sanskritize modern Hindi while Urdu was heavily Persianized to break up a shared use of a common language. In a different



deployment of communalization of language in post-Independence East Pakistan, Urdu was declared to be the mother tongue of all Muslims who were forced to disown their Bengali linguistic identity. The roots of this go back much earlier in Bengal, when, to strengthen a communalized Muslim identity, a, Urduized version of Bengali was developed to underline religious divisions among Bengali language users. The communal separation of language use was an indication of the larger communal conviction that religious difference must encompass all aspects of life. The lesson was clear: if nothing is to be held in common, then neither a common territory nor a common nation state is possible. The two nation theory led

straight to two different states, even when so many Hindus and Muslims outside the Muslim League and the Hindu Mahasabha had opposed the two nation theory.

What explains the compulsion that drives the production of antagonism? If it is not natural or innate, why do people strive to create it?

This is a most difficult and complex question which may not have a single valid answer that can work in all historical situations. We can, nonetheless, begin to speculate about it in two different directions. Let us first look at ideologues of communalism who propagated violent mutual hatred through their writings, organizational training, cultural activities. We find that:

• They all belong to the upper echelons of their society; they are well off, well born people with social influence and power.

• Second, they have come forward with their message of hate precisely in those historical moments when socially subordinated and exploited people—women, low castes, labouring groups—had tried to claim entitlements to security, welfare, equality. In other words, whenever social hierarchies and the power of elites have been questioned, men of power resorted to communalism as an alternative to struggles against social power.

In the late nineteenth century, there were some protests that were articulated against village distributive systems, patriarchal authority and caste power: by social reformers, by low caste leaders, in women's writings. There were demands for gender-just laws, entitlement of low castes and women to education, and, later, a new Constitution with electoral facilities for weaker sections. The British administrative machinery tried to offer promises—often empty or purely notional ones—to offset nationalist mobilization and critiques of colonial governance. In 1910, E A Gait, the Census Commissioner, tried to classify untouchables as a separate community who were promised separate electorates in 1932.

Social reform movement: All these developments shook up the foundations of power and privilege to some extent as the norms of social hierarchy were no longer unquestioned and a new set of norms based on equality and rights came to be articulated. In order to stem the process, the privileged had to bind dispossessed people of their community closer together if the material bases of their power were to survive. There were two ways of doing this. One could be through a form of social reform where some amelioration would be granted to improve the conditions of subordinated people and some concessions as well as some surrender of the worst excesses of privilege and exploitation could be ensured. They could also play a game of divide and rule to check the coming together of all subordinate people together by dividing them up on communal lines. We find both strands within twentieth century developments. The Indian National Congress did build up a massive mass-based anti-colonial struggle partly by underlining the ravages that colonialism had wreaked in the lives of workers, peasants and tribals and by unifying them on the basis of demands for rectifications. After Ambedkar and Periyar began to mobilize untouchables outside the Congress parameters on a radical demand for the annihilation of caste, the Congress also attended—in a somewhat desultory fashion—to struggles against untouchability. The growth of the Left forces among poor peasants and workers and of women's organizations among Hindu, Muslim, Parsi and European women, also created more pressure for radical nationalist perspectives and strategies.

From 1921, Gandhian and Khilafat mass movements wooed subaltern groups like peasants—Hindu and Muslim—as valued political and patriotic subjects while non-Congress organizations among the Left, the low castes and women inaugurated an unprecedented and complex era of radical politics. The combination of reformism, mass movements, Left and radical demands for equal rights had to be fought by those segments that subscribed to an ideology of hereditary social hierarchies. And that agenda needed



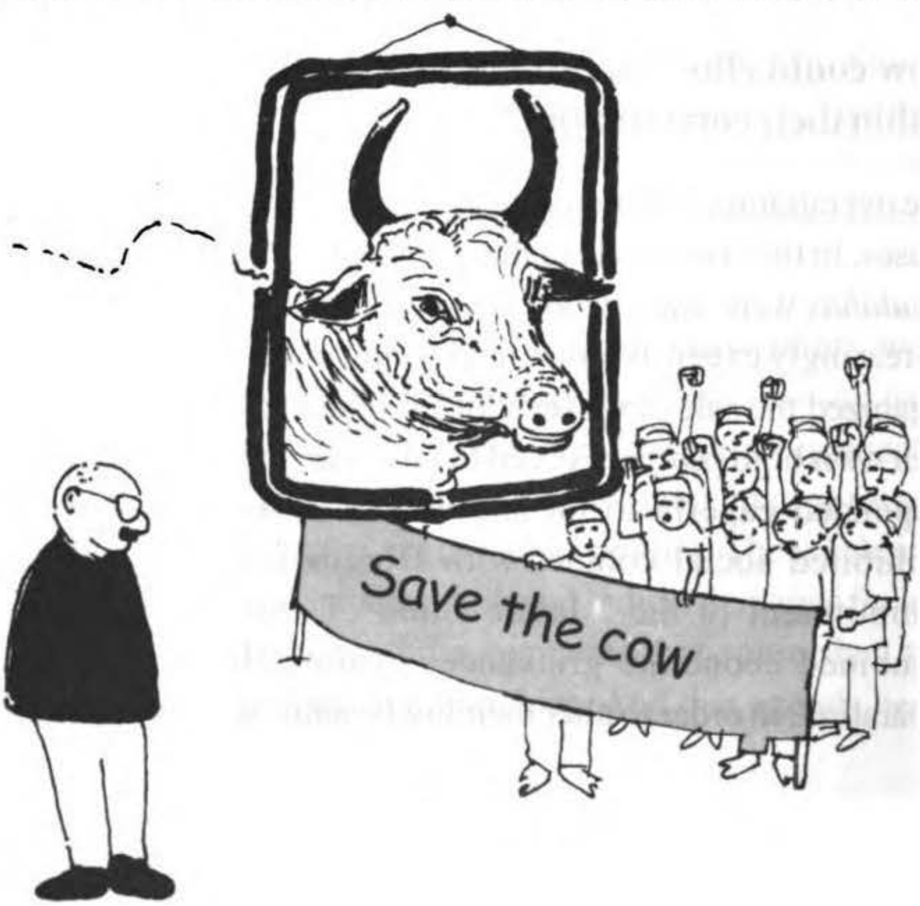
to acquire an emotional force apart from prescriptive sanctions or brute power if it wanted to prevail against the pull of the mass struggles. From the late 1890s, we have systematic and aggressive efforts at conversion, riots over cow slaughter and music before mosques at prayer time, Urdu versus Nagri disputes.

How could elite communal leaders mobilize mass support within their communities?

The overarching communal ideology would be fuelled often by local causes. In the last decade of the nineteenth century, Muslim weavers or *julahas* were sandwiched between Hindu spinners who provided increasingly expensive yarn, and Hindu traders-moneylenders who organized the sale of woven cloth at relatively low prices to ensure their own high profits. Forced to buy dear and sell low, the *julahas* responded eagerly to the message of Muslim reformists who prohibited social contact with Hindus and advised a greater commitment to the Islamic ritual of cow sacrifice. *Julahas* combined economic grievances against Hindus with cultural separation, in order to alter their lowly status within the community

and to change their nomenclature to a more respectable Momin or Ansari. Seeking social respectability within the community, they emerged as musclemen, taking on Hindus who disrupted ritual cow slaughter. Hindus who did so were *gwalas* from the cowherd castes who, too, wanted improved ritual status within their larger community and who found it expedient to do so through seizing the initiative against the practice of cow slaughter.

In our own times, too, we have found the untouchable caste of *bhangis* or sweepers become active in anti-Muslim riots as a segment broke off from their older nomenclature and appropriated a new name, Valmiki. In Gujarat, in more recent times, too, dalits and tribals engaged in anti-Muslim rioting, an act that was a source of enhanced social esteem within the Hindu community. Shared violence against non-Hindus began to act as cement, binding a stratified community intimately while leaving actual material disparities untouched. Riots may be thus seen as a route to Sankritization, a means of improving the ritual status by a lowly caste. Moreover, once violence starts, it acquires a self fulfilling logic of its own. Widespread mutual aggression breeds mutual suspicion, erodes memories of peaceful coexistence, forces self

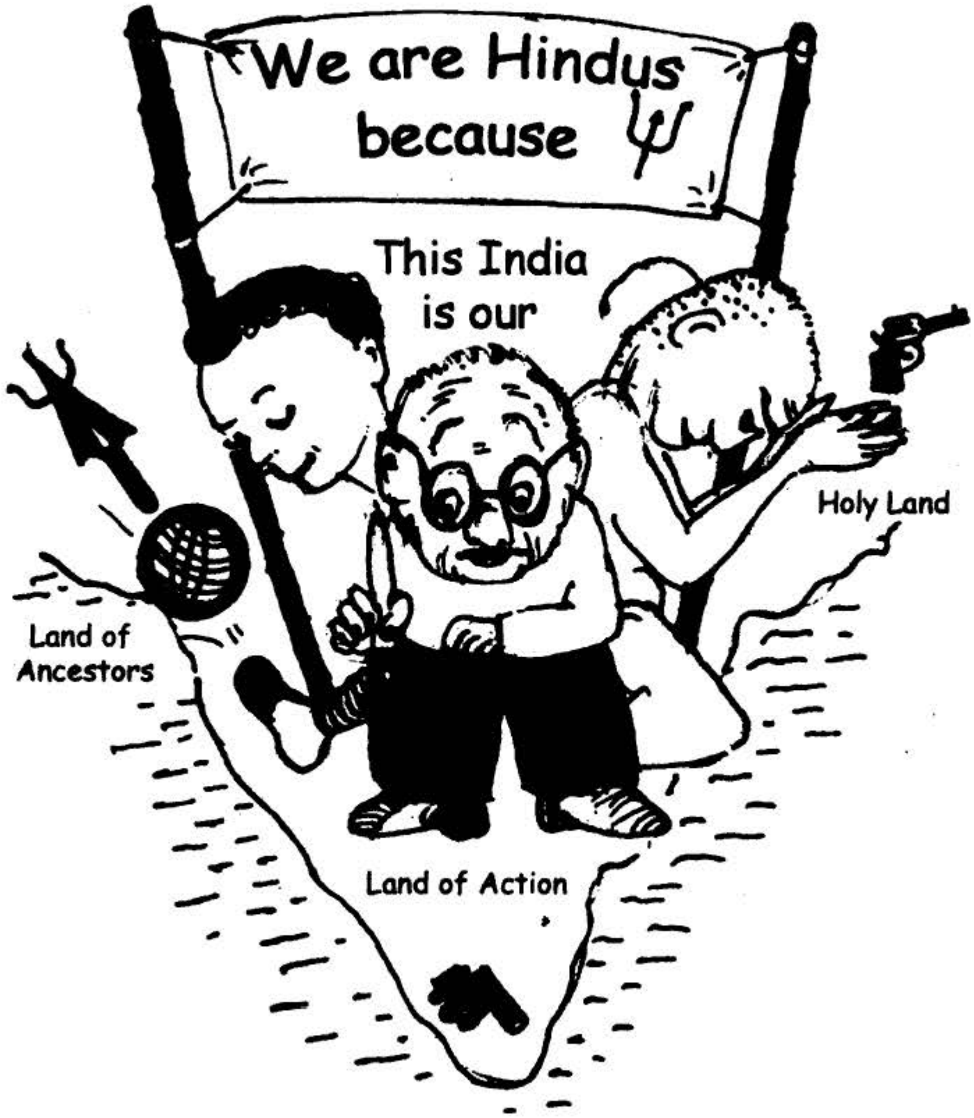


defence against one another and creates convincing stereotypes of the hostile and intolerant 'Other'. Subalterns seek safety and shelter from their social superiors and the elite relies on the muscle power of subalterns. Violence knits a hierarchized society freshly together even as it drives wedges between two communities. That is why periodic violence is a structural necessity for communal ideologues.

The early twenties of the last century saw a more consolidated, organized form of communal mobilization. Conversions became competitive and led to violence and bred new organizations; the Tanzeem and the Tabligh for the Muslims and Shuddhi and Sangathan movement for Hindus. Conversion was threatening as it would increase the numerical strength of the other community about which great anxieties were produced by decennial Census calculations. Rumours spread about abductions of women by men of the other community, always feared as a source of loss of lineage and community honour. Moreover, abductions not only added new female numbers to the other community, they also meant the loss of future progeny of one's own and fresh additions to the other's numerical strength. To the fears of loss of faith and of women was eventually added the reality of Partition—the loss of land by the creation of a Muslim state.

The origin of Hindutva

In 1923, V D Savarkar, a Hindu Mahasabha leader wrote a book called *Hindutva; Who Is a Hindu?* This emerged as the foundational text for the emergent Hindutva ideology. He asserted that India is a land of Hindu culture, it belongs only to those who see her as Holy Land, land of our ancestors and land of our action. Here *Punyabhoomi* signified that one's sacred sites must be located within the territorial boundaries of India. By that definition, Muslims and Christians were excluded from belonging since their sacred sites also lay outside these confines. They were now defined as exiles in their own country, as non-Indians and as antinationals. M S Golwalkar, the second supremo and the major theoretician of



the RSS would say in the late thirties that Hindus should treat the Indian minorities the way Hitler treated the Jews.

Savarkar had been a revolutionary nationalist in his early life, though he withdrew from anti-colonial politics later. While he was still a part of the revolutionary movement, he had written a book on the revolt of 1857. He characterized the rising as a conspiracy of displaced kings rather than as a people's rising. He, moreover, provided a highly coloured account of the revenge that sepoys wreaked on the unarmed and vulnerable British women and children. The value system that he formulates for Hindutva thus equated heroism with violence, revenge even against women and children. He also wrote a history of medieval Indian history in several volumes. He criticized Shivaji for failing to dishonour the queens of defeated Muslim enemies. His history depicted those

times entirely a recurrence of Muslim invasions, as if nothing else was happening in the country except for Muslim attacks on Hindus. He, moreover, explained the attacks as motivated as much by the Muslim lust for Hindu queens as by the desire for territorial conquest. All Muslims here are seen as foreign invaders and all of them have designs on Hindu well born women and on the land of the Hindus. Such motifs came back to haunt accounts of Partition. So Savarkar provided three convictions:

• India belongs to Hindus alone and all others are foreign enemies.

• Muslims have always assaulted our holy land and our pure and noble queens.

• Hindus must return this violence in equal measure in order to regain their male pride.

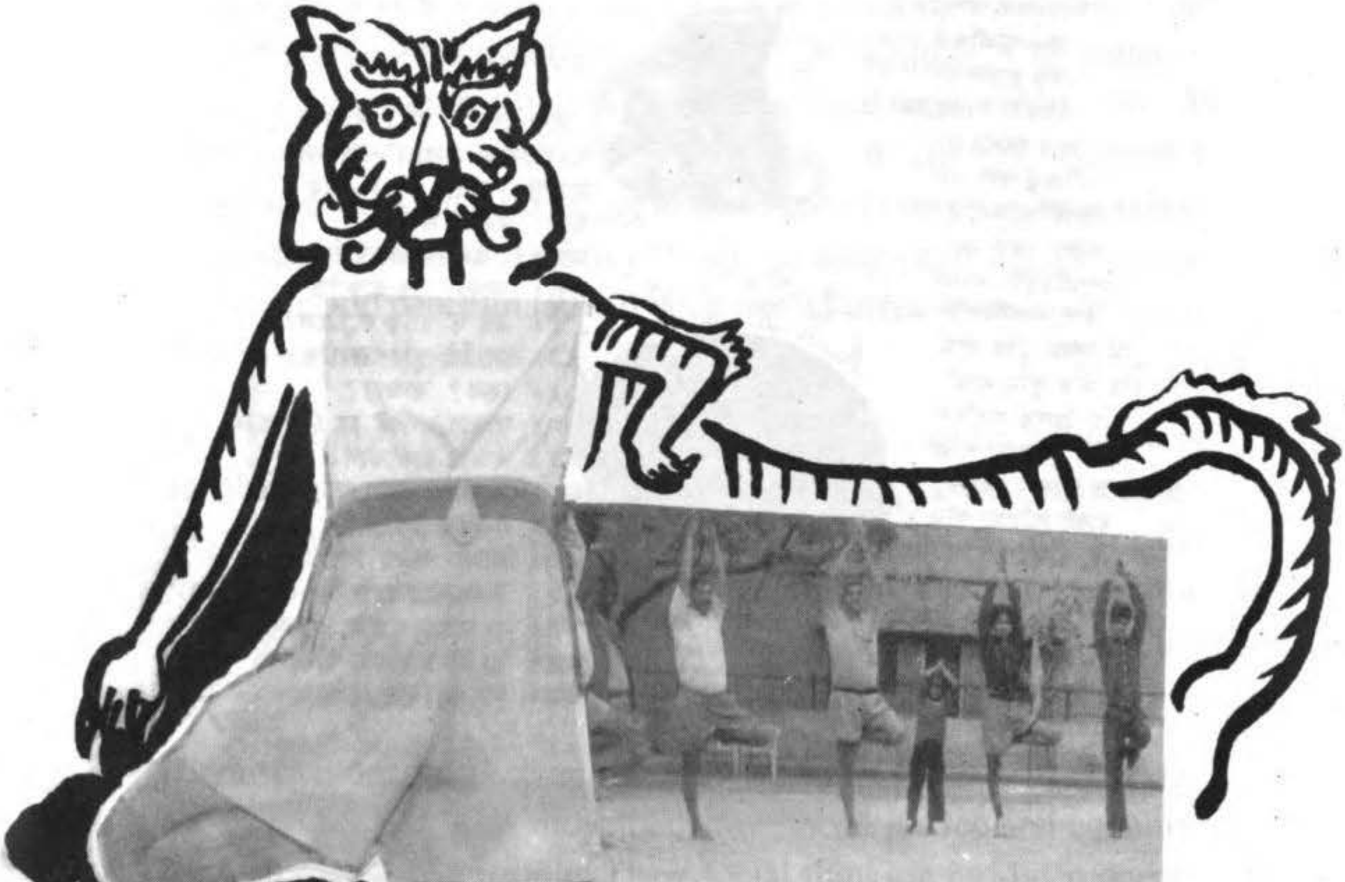
Revenge coloured his image of Hindu masculinity as well as of Hindu femininity. He asked women to narrate tales of Hindu revenge and martial triumphs to their children in order to inculcate a desire for aggression in them as well as in themselves. He defined the woman as primarily a mother but his image of motherhood had little to do with nurture. He described the ideal mother as a lioness, sitting at the site of the kill, smeared with the blood of the slain prey and suckling her cubs.



Savarkar's history is marked by strange presences and absences. He is silent about all social disparities among Hindus, he mentions no internal relations of power among them. At the same time, in a sense, even the upper caste Hindus are ascribed a foreign origin. He followed a racial theory of human origins that was then prevalent in the West and he proudly said that upper castes originated from the Aryan racial stock, they came from outside, vanquishing the indigenous people who fell into low caste categories. At the same time, he takes the sting out of the racial difference, of the Aryan invasion theory, by simultaneously saying that the two races or all the castes intermarried or had secret sexual contact over the years, so now all share a common blood. Since low castes are now relocated within a larger family or a kinship group, he finds no reason to emphasize their unequal location. Power is overshadowed by shared blood and kinship.

Hindutva and Patriotism: We know Savarkar was a nationalist, at least for some time. Even if the RSS did not participate in anti-colonial movements, did it inculcate feelings of patriotism among its followers? Yes, there is a kind of patriotism that Savarkar's ideas created and that the Sangh inculcates. It is a patriotism that can do without anti-colonial struggles in the present but which inspires a thirst for violent retaliation against imagined past offences, even on the weak and the vulnerable. War stands as the only marker of patriotic feelings and social justice is irrelevant. The land that they worship is a Hindu land.

They derive some crucial ingredients of this emotion from Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya's great late nineteenth century novel, the *Anandamath*. In fact, they sing the battle hymn, 'Bande Mataram', every day in the *shakhas*, without altering or translating a single word. They adore it as a sacred text and they demand that this song should be our true national anthem. They propagate the false story that Rabindranath Tagore had written the song Jana Gana Mana—our national anthem—to greet George V.





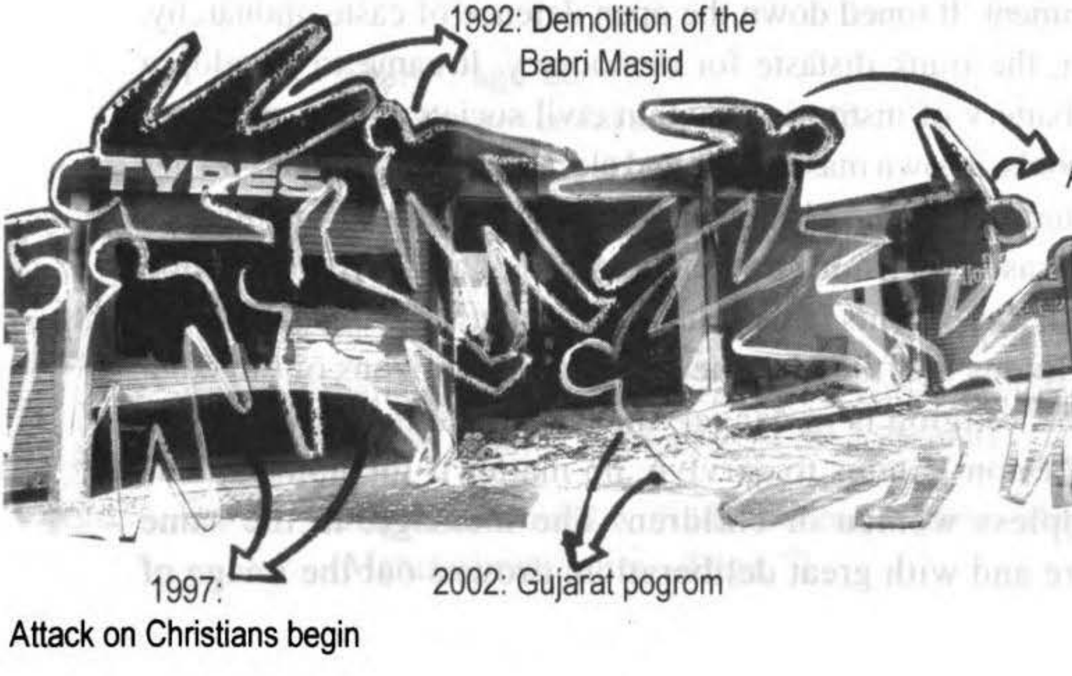
Motherland as the Hindu goddess: The novel has had such a profound influence on the Sangh imagination because it narrates a war against a Muslim monarch by Hindu ascetics. It shows violent attacks against Muslim villagers by Hindu villagers who demand that mosques should be demolished to make way for temple building. Here, a hymn to the deified Motherland slides into a call for war. Revenge and bloodshed take the place of the sacred mantras, become the act of worship. The Motherland is figured as a Hindu goddess. She demands the massacre of enemies, the inauguration of a Hindu state.

Bankimchandra had earlier written in defence of socialism and egalitarianism, about caste, class and gender power, about the wretchedness of Hindu and Muslim peasants. The novel *Anandamath*, too, begins with the account of a terrible famine in

1770 when British revenue extractions send peasants to mass deaths. But soon the tone changes and the hungry peasants become a violent army, inspired by ascetics to kill Muslims. War replaces images of starvation, ruined villages, a dry and death ridden land. A blood lust fills up the novelistic landscape. The country becomes a vengeful goddess; it is no longer the land and the people. The goddess demands the blood of Muslims. The hymn begins with the invocation of a green and peaceful land. It becomes an invocation of an armed demon slaying goddess.

This was only a phase in Bankimchandra's literary life which was deeply experimental and ever changing. The RSS has sedimented this moment and its emotional resonances into a definition of the country—a definition where the land, the air, the water and the poor people who make up the country are supremely irrelevant, the country is defined by enemies, threatened borders, bloodlust.

Hindutva is not merely communalism. In equal measure, it provides a violent alternative to movements for social justice and equality, for welfare of poor people. Their social thinking has been deeply inspired by both the Arya Samaj and its rival, the orthodox Hindu organizations of the late nineteenth century. Swami Dayanand



criticized much in Hindu traditions; the myths, Puranic ritualism, idolatry, polytheism and priesthood. But he never quite condemned the four caste order or Varnashram. In his last years, he preferred to castigate against Islam and Christianity which overshadowed his critical engagement with Hindu traditions. Later, the Arya Samajists would come together with the orthodox groups in their shared project of conversions and anti-Muslim campaigns against ritual cow slaughter. The orthodoxy was also involved in a strident defence of brahmanical leadership, of caste, of Hindu ritualism.

The early leaders of the Sangh were quite open about their preferences. Golwalkar said that monarchy was the ideal form of Hindu political organization as caste was the most appropriate form of social organization. He expressed abhorrence for democracy which he called a western idea. But he and the Sangh were forced to live in an India whose independence brought in universal adult suffrage, a republic and a Constitution that was composed by an untouchable. It promised a fully secular democracy where all religions, castes, genders and classes had equal citizenship rights. The RSS had to formulate a different rhetoric which would not compromise its social thinking but which would still be able to compete for mass mobilization in this transformed democratic environment. It toned down the open defence of caste, monarchy, fascism, the frank distaste for democracy. It came to develop a whole battery of institutions within civil society; training centres and schools, its own mass media and electoral party, religious bodies and cultural, philanthropic organizations. The task of this multifarious cluster was to transmit a particular vision of an alternative nation state. All these fronts in their many different ways and languages teach Hindus that they are the only rightful citizens of the land, that their religion is in danger, that their religion demands the blood of non-Hindus to survive, no matter if the non- Hindus are helpless women or children. The message, in the same measure and with great deliberation, drowns out the image of a different nation; secular, democratic, egalitarian and peaceful.

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   Harappan seal—Page 21*
   Sculpture of woman—Page 28
   Sculpture of man—Page 28
   Mother Goddess—Page 30
   The Great Bath—Page 32
   Sculpture of priest—Page 32
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   Garuda Pillar—Page 70
   Varaha Avatar—Page 70
   Vishnu Temple—Page 74
   Brick Temple—Page 80

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   The controversial seal—Page 26
   Bangles—Page 28
   Earthenware, toys, weapons—Page 29
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    Hazrat Mohammad's sketch based on 'Siar-i-Nabi' (The Life of Nabi) done in the sixteenth century—Page 92

The Vedas, Hinduism, Hindutva

TEXT
Kumkum Roy, Kunal Chakrabarti, Tanika Sarkar
VISUALS
Soumik Nandy Majumdar, Parvez Kabir, Sanchayan Ghosh

Most of us have heard about the Vedas and some of us may even know or chant a few Vedic mantras. Of late we may have noticed that attempts are being made to trace everything that is 'good' back to the Vedas and proclaim the Vedic people as the 'real' authors of the Harappan civilization. This strategy is used to argue that a whole range of religious traditions—especially Hinduism—are actually derived from the Vedic religion.

Is the Harrapan civilization Vedic? Should the Harappan civilization be renamed the Sarasvati civilization? How Vedic are our religious traditions? Is the Puranic religion the same as the Vedic religion? What features are unique to Hinduism? Is the *Bhagavad Gita* the sacred text of the Hindus? What is Hindutva? Is it synonymous with Hinduism? Is the Hindutva brigade trying to claim a monopoly on the religious beliefs and practices in India?

These claims have been examined by three leading historians for the curious reader and a well-researched visual text makes it come alive for them. The volume has a Foreword by **Romila Thapar,** one of India's most eminent historians.

Kumkum Roy, **Kunal Chakrabarti** and **Tanika Sarkar** teach history at the Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University.

Soumik Nandy Majumdar and **Sanchayan Ghosh** teach art history and painting respectively at Kala Bhavan, Visva Bharati. **Parvez Kabir** studies art history at MS University, Baroda.

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